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Sentimentalist Virtue Ethics

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*1. Classical Moral Sentimentalism and Virtue Ethics*

The philosophical movement we call moral sentimentalism originated in Britain in the eighteenth century. The man now considered its founder, the (third) Earl of Shaftesbury, mixed rationalist and sentimentalist elements together in his thinking, but the later sentimentalists Francis Hutcheson and David Hume were more univocally sentimentalist in their approach or approaches, though the other main eighteenth-century sentimentalist, Adam Smith, introduced some more historically rationalist elements back into the picture. However, in order to understand what this means, we need to distinguish the metaethical and normative sides of moral sentimentalism.

The sentimentalist views of Hutcheson and Hume (in their different ways) combine a metaethical theory of moral judgment that emphasizes the role of affect in the making of such judgments with a normative theory according to which virtue consists in having and acting on warm motivating sentiments like benevolence, gratitude, compassion, and love of one's own children (or on sentiments that derive indirectly from these motives). But these two aspects of sentimentalism don't always go together, and in particular Smith combines a sentimentalist metaethics with a normative view of moral virtue that sees it as tied to a quasi-Stoic or quasi-Aristotelian form of propriety rather as fundamentally involving warm sentiments. However, one also finds the opposite phenomenon—normative sentimentalism without an accompanying sentimentalist metaethics—at many points in the earlier history of ethics.

Thus Christianity places a great normative emphasis on mercy, compassion, kindness, and love in a way that was almost totally alien to Greek and Roman thought, and the Augustine of the "Ten Homilies of the First Epistle of St. John" offers us, for example, a thoroughly sentimentalist agapic criterion of morally right action (Augustine, 1955). Normative sentimentalism was also anticipated in the thought of India and China. The moral centrality for Buddhism of compassion and kindness toward those struggling in the unsatisfying cycle of lives gives it a strongly sentimentalist character. And there are at least elements of sentimentalism in Mencius's approach to normative ethics, which treated benevolence or sympathy (*ren*) as essential to our humanity (Mencius, 2003). But none of these developments was accompanied by any articulated theory of the nature of moral judgment.

However, the "main body" of the historical movement we call moral sentimentalism is to be found in the eighteenth century and involves both normative and metaethical elements. Skipping over Shaftesbury's more inchoate contributions, we need to discuss Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith in that order to understand better how moral sentimentalism relates to virtue ethics. We will then consider later developments that bear on this issue.

Francis Hutcheson is perhaps more famous for his idea of moral judgment made through a moral sense and for having introduced the first English-language version of the principle of utility than for anything having to do with virtue ethics. But there are strong virtue-ethical elements in his normative theory. This is perhaps most easily seen if one contrasts how he came to the principle of utility with what later, utilitarian philosophers thought about similar matters. Later utilitarians, especially Bentham, apply a fundamental consequentialist test of utility to both actions and motives: motives are to be considered good if and only if they have or tend to have good consequences for human or sentient happiness. By contrast, Hutcheson thought that our moral sense directly approves of the motive of universal benevolence, of equal benevolence toward everyone. He concludes that this motive is morally good in itself and independently of its consequences, and he derived a utilitarian criterion of right action from what he had to say about universal benevolence. Because such benevolence seeks best consequences, a right action can be understood as one that produces what the best of motives wants to see occur, and this leads to the principle of utility.

Hutcheson has a typically virtue-ethical way of normatively evaluating motives, namely, in terms of their intrinsic character as motives—rather than their consequences or their tendency to make us conform to independently justified rules (Hutcheson, 1725/38). But even while making use of his virtue-ethical criterion of good motivation, he is led to a consequentialist criterion of right action. And it is just not clear what to say about that criterion in relation to virtue ethics. Present-day Aristotelian virtue ethicists such as Rosalind Hursthouse (Hursthouse, 1999) say that actions are right if they are what a virtuous individual would characteristically do, and Hutcheson's criterion seems relevantly similar: right actions are those that someone with perfectly virtuous motivation and full knowledge of circumstances would perform. And though this leads to act-consequentialism, the original idea derives from something that seems highly virtue-ethical (Darwall, 1995). So it is not difficult to view Hutcheson as a virtue ethicist, and of a sentimentalist kind because of his emphasis on benevolence rather than Aristotelian rational insight into the most noble choice between extremes, as the basis for moral virtue and moral action.

The case for calling Hume a virtue ethicist is somewhat more ambiguous. In Book III, Part II, section I of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume says that "all virtuous actions derive their merit only from virtuous motives...." (Hume, 1740/2000). This certainly sounds like virtue ethics. But unlike Hutcheson (and if we may ignore a caveat to be discussed in just a moment), Hume treats both the virtue status of motives and judgments about such status as deriving largely from considerations concerning the motives' consequences (including whether they are immediately pleasing to people). This isn't the purest kind of virtue ethics, and matters get more complicated or obscure when Hume introduces his ideas about justice concerning rights of property, fidelity to promises, and other "artificial virtues" (starting also in Book III, Part II, section I). For Hume, it is obligatory to return borrowed property even when we could do more social good by not returning it, but the motive that underlies such action involves a conscientious sense of its obligatory quality and so isn't specifiable independently of the obligation to perform the action in question. If we try to account for the rightness/justice of returning the property and invoke the motive from which we typically act in doing so, we seem (in Hume's own words) to be "reasoning in a circle." Therefore the virtue-ethical account of right action Hume initially offers us has to be qualified in terms that at the very least suggest that right action has a status as such independent of our immediate underlying motivations. And that is precisely *not* to think of right action in virtue-ethical terms. The picture of Hume as a virtue ethicist or in relation to virtue ethics is therefore at the very least blurred or mixed.

One way of understanding Hume's moral sentimentalism (and this can be applied in varying degrees to the other eighteenth-century sentimentalists as well) is to see it as mainly or solely theorizing about the correct empirical description of the psychology of moral judgment. This would make sentimentalism of interest primarily as an intellectual ancestor to the many recent psychological and neuroscientific studies which reveal that the moral judgments of most experimental subjects contain a significant affective element (see Prinz, 2007, for references). Indeed, Hume describes his *Treatise* as "an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects;" and some commentators have insisted that the aims of his ethical writings are entirely descriptive. Yet other scholars argue that Hume and his intellectual allies meant their sentimentalist thesis to be taken normatively as well. After all, Hume saw his moral philosophy as radically original, yet few philosophers or psychologists have ever denied that emotions play a role in most moral judgments. Traditionally, moral rationalists have seen this empirical reality as representing a normative failing, an unfortunate victory of illegitimate emotion over the morally legitimate authority of reason. Hume's revolutionary claim, however, is that reason not only "is" but also "ought to be the slave of the passions" (Hume, 1740/2000: 266). In its classic form, moral sentimentalism can issue in normative as well as descriptive theories (see Frazer, 2013). Or, to put it in terms more congenial to recent philosophy, it can not only formulate or suggest accounts of what moral judgments mean, but also make moral judgments in its own right. And in the eighteenth century much of this normative content tended toward virtue ethics.

However, moral sentimentalism seen as a metaethical theory about how (empirically and/or by definition) emotion enters into the making of moral judgments *needn't* commit itself to any particular kind of normative ethics much less to specific moral judgments. There is no necessary connection between understanding proper moral judgment as a matter of affectively-loaded sentiments and taking character traits, rather than actions, rules, or good consequences, as the locus of such judgment, and such metaethics is or can be entirely neutral about which judgments about actions, rules, consequences, or character traits one ought to make. Virtues and vices, rule-abiding and rule-violating actions, good and bad consequent states of affairs, and many other moral phenomena can all be the objects of our emotional reactions. One may be outraged by unjust character, but one can also be outraged by an unjust law or social norm, by a particular act of injustice, or even by the terrible state of affairs in which many suffer from injustice.

As we shall see later, many contemporary metaethicists defending some form of sentimentalism have felt free to remain neutral on normative issues, but there is also precedent for this among the classical sentimentalists of the Enlightenment era. Adam Smith, for example, begins the seventh and final part of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* by describing moral philosophy as the attempt to answer two distinct questions. "First, wherein does virtue consist?....And, secondly, by what power or faculty of the mind is it that this character, whatever it be, is recommended to us?” Smith insists that an answer to this second question, "though of the greatest importance in speculation, is of none in practice" (Smith, 1759/1790/1984: 265, 315).

The very language Smith uses to frame his two questions suggests, however, that moral sentimentalism may not be as normatively neutral as it might first appear. If we determine that our moral sentiments are indeed the mental faculties by which (as yet undetermined) virtuous character is "recommended to us," then we may not have moved toward specific answers to questions about how we should live or act, but we have in fact assumed that these normative questions are to be answered through the emotional evaluation of character traits rather than of actions, rules, or states of affairs.

Smith, like Hume and Hutcheson before him, was more or less a virtue theorist. The eighteenth century regarded philosophy as of no value unless it can act as a practical guide to life, and Enlightenment moralists would have felt they couldn't, responsibly, confine themselves entirely to speculative topics. And when they addressed normative questions--which all of them did--Enlightenment sentimentalists typically did so in a virtue-ethical style or manner.

This connection between sentimentalist accounts of moral judgment and virtue may just be a historical accident. Before the emergence of Kant-inspired deontology and classical utilitarianism a la Bentham, virtue ethics was the dominant approach in Western ethics. So Smith could feel free to see the entire history of ethics--as he does in the final part of his *Theory*--as a series of debates about the content of virtue and the faculties by which we determine this content. In addressing the first of his two ethical questions, Smith considers that virtue may consist in prudence and the pursuit of enlightened self-interest (as the Epicureans argue) or benevolence (as Hutcheson, the Cambridge Platonists, and, on many interpretations, Hume argue) or (as Smith himself argues, placing himself alongside Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Samuel Clarke) propriety and the fittingness of our behavior to our situation. In addressing the second of his questions, Smith considers that virtue may be recommended to us by self-love (as Hobbes and Pufendorf argue), by reason (as Plato, Platonists, and rationalists generally argue), or by sentiment (as Hutcheson, Hume, Smith and their fellow sentimentalists argue). Yet Smith never directly considers the possibility that virtue may be a mere epiphenomenon parasitic on more fundamental ethical categories such as deontological rules or consequentialist goods.

However, while the iron laws of chronology prevented the classic sentimentalists from considering the alternatives to virtue ethics that were later developed by Kant, Bentham, and others, it is easy to exaggerate the degree to which their commitment to virtue ethics was a mere matter of historical circumstance rather than philosophical principle. Each classic sentimentalist, in his own way, explains (if sometimes only in passing) why virtues and vices are always the primary object of our emotionally-loaded approbation or disapprobation, respectively, and why other moral categories have only a secondary or derivative role. But let us also now note how different the putative normative virtue ethics of Smith is from that of Hume or of Hutcheson. For Hume and Hutcheson moral virtue consists or can be seen as consisting in (direct or redirected) benevolence, but for Smith virtue is a matter of propriety and/or fittingness, and there is something much more warm and emotional about the former content of virtue than about the latter. That provides a sense, then, in which, apart from the issue of virtue ethics, Hutcheson and Hume are both normative sentimentalists and Smith is not.

However, Smith's theory of moral judgment is very much within the sentimentalist mode pioneered by Hutcheson and Hume. The *Theory of Moral Sentiments* describes moral judgment as a process by which we imaginatively place ourselves in the situation of the object of our judgment. Insofar as our imagined reactions to this situation match the actual reactions of the person being evaluated, we sympathize fully with the actor, judging these reactions to be proper and the character underlying them to be virtuous. When other individuals are affected by an actor's conduct, we also judge the reactions that the actor solicits from them. If the actor is a proper object of others' gratitude, then we judge the actor to have not only the virtue of propriety but also the virtue of being "meritorious." If the actor is the proper object of others' resentment, then we judge them to have both the vice of impropriety and the vice of injustice. However, even though he focuses on virtue, Smith never denies that morality can also be understood as a system of rules. But we choose rules through noting what kinds of actions we approve or disapprove--so for Smith rules are morally secondary and derivative (Frazer, 2010: 89-111).

We should also mention a later eighteenth-century development that follows in Smith's footsteps. Johann Gottfried Herder came to defend a pluralist form of virtue ethics through application of Smithian sympathy across barriers of historical and cultural difference (for a full discussion, see Frazer 2010, 139-67). Herder urges his readers to feel their way into the position of those whose moral sentiments about what counts as a virtue are very different from the reader's own. (Herder is widely thought to be ultimately responsible for the coinage of the word "Einfuehlung," later translated into English as "empathy," to name this process of sentimental self-projection.) Through empathetic engagement with other cultures, Herder came to understand that much of what his fellow eighteenth-century Europeans dismissed as strange and unnatural actually represents distinctive forms of human excellence. "Human nature," he writes, has "such flexibility and mutability as to be able to form out [*ausbilden*] for itself in the most diverse situations...the most diverse ideals of its actions into what is called *virtue* and the most diverse ideals of its sensations into what is called *happiness* (Forster, ed., 2002: 270). But Herder's pluralism wasn't relativism because Herder himself doesn't approve of everything he encounters empathically in other cultures. And while he approved of many different and incompatible forms of virtue, he also defended a universal sense of justice based in our shared humanity and love of reciprocity--though this conception of justice retained a recognizably virtue-ethical form.

2. Later Moral Sentimentalism and Virtue Ethics

It is perhaps ironic from the standpoint of the present chapter and its title that the clearest-cut examples of sentimentalist virtue ethics occur *after* the "classical period" of moral sentimentalism. The outstanding British sentimentalist of the nineteenth century was James Martineau. (While Martineau may now be considered obscure, this was not always the case, and Sidgwick [1907/1981] devoted a whole chapter of his *Methods of Ethics* to Martineau’s normative theory.) In his two-volume *Types of Ethical Theory*, Martineau clearly aligned himself with the earlier moral sentimentalists, especially Hutcheson, and offered a criterion of right action that exemplifies the purest form of virtue ethics (Martineau, 1885/1891). He regarded motivation as morally assessable in terms of its intrinsic character and he argued for a hierarchy of secular motives with malice at the bottom and compassion at the top. Then, assuming that every situation of genuine moral choice basically involves a conflict between two motives, Martineau claimed that an act is right if and only if it comes from the higher of the two motives that conflict in any situation of moral choice.

This normative theory is more purely virtue-ethical than anything in Hutcheson or Hume. But Sidgwick made some telling criticisms of Martineau's moral criterion, and Martineau's view has been pretty widely ignored since the days of Sidgwick (Sidgwick, 1907/1981). In recent years, however, there has been a revival of normative sentimentalism, and some of what has been said is closely related to virtue ethics.

Perhaps the most prominent form of such sentimentalism in recent decades has been the ethics of care. Pioneered by Carol Gilligan (1982/1993) and Nel Noddings (1984), this approach emphasizes the emotional character of moral motivation and argues that the roots of our moral obligations lie not in reason but in certain kinds of emotion-involving relationships. According to most care ethics, right actions have to be caring (or at least not callous or malicious) actions, but caring seeks not only to help others, but to sustain or improve caring relationships generally. And most care ethicists hold that care ethics isn't a form of virtue ethics, even of sentimentalist virtue ethics, because they take the source of ethical virtue to lie in the qualities of good caring relationships rather than in what is virtuous about individuals as individuals.

However, in recent years Michael Slote has developed a form of care ethics that seeks to be virtue-ethical as well and to be so entirely within a sentimentalist framework. He is in fact the only present-day proponent of sentimentalist virtue ethics, and his *Moral Sentimentalism* (Slote, 2010) accordingly offers a criterion of right action which treats acts as morally (all) right if and only if they don't exhibit or reflect a lackof empathic concern for others. (A person who isn't as empathic as it is possible for someone to be doesn't necessarily count as *lacking* in empathy.) This criterion brings in empathy more clearly and self-consciously than earlier care ethics did, and Slote anchors this criterion in a metaethical empathy-based account of the meaning of moral terms. He also rejects the idea that care ethics has to be based on good relationships, rather than good qualities of individuals, at least partly on the grounds that we make moral distinctions *within* good relationships in terms of the different roles, motivation, and behavior of the individuals involved in them. He argues that the goodness and beauty of the mother-child relationship as a relationship cannot be the source of all moral distinctions, because within that very relationship there is an ethical difference between the caringness of the mother and the openness to being cared for that the child may demonstrate. The sheer goodness of the relationship doesn't distinguish these qualities of the individuals involved in that relationship, but a virtue-ethical care ethics that focuses on individual qualities and motives—and that emphasizes the virtue of empathically caring—can easily do so.

Slote further argues that a strictly sentimentalist virtue-ethical form of care ethics can account for deontology, respect, autonomy, rights, and justice in terms very different from those that are invoked by the *Kantian*-Rawlsian liberalism that has recently dominated the landscape of political philosophy (Rawls, 1971). Respect, for example, can be reconceived as having empathy with other people's ideas, aspirations, and general points of view--rather than imposing our own ideas of the good on them. And such an approach claims to be able to account for our present-day ideas about justice more adequately than liberalism and other views do.

The virtue-ethical sentimentalist seeks to explain what is wrong about denying people religious freedom and about abandoning the sick and poor to the vagaries of social competition, in distinctively care-ethical terms. But if what a sentimentalist approach has to say on *more* *controversial* questions is more intuitively correct than the opposed results that views like liberalism arrive at regarding them, that would favor thinking of political issues generally in sentimentalist terms rather than in the more familiar way these issues are treated by liberalism. For example, liberalism a la Rawls holds that liberty trumps considerations of well-being in developed societies (Rawls, 1971, 1993); but that means that judges shouldn't promptly (and without further, later legal proceedings) issue restraining orders against husbands whose wives tell them (the judges) that they and/or their children have been threatened with physical violence by their husbands. Now in the past and in many present jurisdictions judges have indeed been reluctant to issue such temporary restraining orders on the say-so of a wife who is coming forward for the first time to make such a complaint, and this accords with what liberalism (or libertarianism) thinks is the just way for matters to be handled and for the law itself to be.

But sentimentalist care ethics, whether in virtue-ethical or non-virtue-ethical form, thinks differently about this. It holds women's (welfare interest in) security and safety to be morally more important than the complete freedom of movement of husbands, and it claims that a general empathic concern for others will be sensitive to this difference of importance and therefore defend the justice of promptly issuing a restraining order. And to the extent this seems to us nowadays (partly through the influence of the women's movement) to be the right way to resolve the just-mentioned legal/jurisprudential issue, the sentimentalist approach may seem superior, as a general account of political or legal justice, to what Rawlsian/Kantian liberalism has to say. Slote's sentimentalist virtue ethics has similarly critical things to say about the liberal idea that hate speech should always be legally permitted. There is a distinction between merely offensive speech and harmful speech, and the typical Kantian liberal view that, e. g., neo-Nazis should have been allowed to march and speechify, during the 1970's, in Skokie, Illinois, where there was a large population of Holocaust survivors seemingly blurs that important moral distinction: the point, from the standpoint of a sentimentalist virtue ethics of caring, being that what the neo-Nazis intended to do in Skokie would likely have had a retraumatizing effect on the survivors.

In the last decade or so virtue ethics has taken its place alongside consequentialism and Kantian ethics as one of the three main approaches to normative ethics. (This is reflected in leading textbooks, encyclopedias, and anthologies.) Although Aristotelian virtue-ethical rationalism has featured more in recent discussion than any other form of virtue ethics, sentimentalist virtue ethics, along with a revival of interest in Hume and Smith, has in the past few years come very strongly to the fore. Contemporary virtue-ethical and care-ethical sentimentalism have in fact certain advantages over Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics. Aristotle didn't favor democracy, and even neo-Aristotelianism has difficult dealing with issues of justice in contemporary terms (Hursthouse, 1990). This is partly, perhaps even largely, due to the absence of considerations of empathy within the rationalistic Aristotelian tradition. Empathy makes it possible to understand and fully respect those who differ from one on political and moral questions, and is thus absolutely necessary to the workability of modern-day pluralist societies (not to mention international relations). So overall a normative sentimentalism that highlights empathy appears to be better geared to present-day circumstances than anything one can find in (neo-)Aristotelianism. Perhaps this has something to do with why sentimentalism has recently become much more prominent both within virtue ethics and in moral philosophy more generally.

However, in order to conclude our discussion of more recent developments, we need to consider present-day forms of sentimentalism about moral judgment. We can be fairly brief about this because, unlike the work of the eighteenth-century sentimentalists, recent "neo-sentimentalist" metaethical views are pretty clearly neutral on normative issues and aren't, therefore, tied either historically or conceptually to virtue ethics. The newer views understand moral judgments as judgments about the appropriateness or rationality of certain affective reactions to the object of evaluation—e. g., outrage or anger at the misbehavior of others or guilt at one's own misbehavior (Gibbard, 1990; D'Arms and Jacobson, 2000). But on such assumptions, moral judgments are judgments about affect, but might themselves remain entirely cold and unemotional (and based in reason). By contrast, in the classical statements of Hume, Smith, and Hutcheson, ethical judgments are understood as "moral sentiments," as emotionally-laden, though idealized or "corrected," feelings of approbation or disapprobation. (These feelings derive from a moral sense in Hutcheson, but from what we would now call empathy according to Smith and Hume.) So the more recent neo-sentimentalism is, as a form of metaethics, less purely sentimentalist than what we find in the classical period and is therefore sometimes aptly designated as "rational sentimentalism." This view also has little or nothing to do with virtue ethics: appropriate anger or guilt can as easily be directed to rule-breaking or to acts that harm as to bad moral character; and in addition there is nothing in the recent metaethics itself that entails that we have to be angry or guilty about harmfulness rather than helpfulness.

So what has been said here about the work of Hutcheson, Hume, Smith, Herder, Martineau, and Slote is much more germane to the designated topic of the present chapter than anything to be found in the writings of the recent neo-sentimentalists. But that is not to deny that metaethical neo-sentimentalism and forms of sentimentalism that involve normative commitments may both show promise in contemporary philosophical terms. And, in addition, there is every reason to think that the current revival of historical and ethical interest in eighteenth-century sentimentalism—especially Hume and Smith—is likely to continue unabated.

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