The Problem of Inconsistency in Wollaston's Moral Theory

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INTRODUCTION

William Wollaston (1659–1724), a philosopher often lampooned or neglected, has in recent times been the subject of articles which, although they acknowledge the flaws in his moral theory, challenge many objections to it.[1] For instance, Joel Feinberg has challenged most of the objections in Hume's famous footnote about Wollaston's philosophy, and Olin Joynton has critiqued the "circularity objection" deployed by Hume, Price, and others against Wollaston's position.[2]

In what follows I continue this trend by challenging an objection that goes unaddressed in the articles just mentioned. Specifically, I challenge Francis Hutcheson's and John Clarke of Hull's alleged demonstrations that Wollaston's moral theory is inconsistent.[3] However, my aim is not merely to challenge Clarke's and Hutcheson's arguments; I also present a form of the inconsistency objection that fares better than theirs. That is, although I show that their

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[1] See note 2. For Wollaston's moral theory see his *Religion of Nature Delineated* [hereafter *RN*] (London, 1724), a facsimile of which is edited by Stanley Tweyman (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1974). In quoting Wollaston I remove most of his italics; also, I modernize his spelling and partially modernize his punctuation. I do the same for the other eighteenth-century authors I quote.

[2] Joel Feinberg, "Wollaston and His Critics," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38 (1977): 345–52; Olin Joynton, "The Problem of Circularity in Wollaston's Moral Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22 (1984): 435–43. See also Olin Joynton, "Wollaston's Theory of Declarative Actions," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 19 (1981): 439–49; Stanley Tweyman, "Truth, Happiness and Obligation: The Moral Philosophy of William Wollaston," *Philosophy* 51 (1976): 35–46; Stanley Tweyman, *Reason and Conduct in Hume and His Predecessors* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 87–99, 103–111; and John J. Tilley, "Physical Objects and Moral Wrongness: Hume on the 'Fallacy' in Wollaston's Moral Theory," *Hume Studies* 35 (2009): 87–101. Hume's famous footnote about Wollaston's philosophy is in David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 297.

[3] Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections. With Illustrations On the Moral Sense* [hereafter "Hutcheson"] (London, 1728), 269–70; John Clarke, *An Examination Of the Notion of Moral Good and Evil, Advanced in a late Book, entitled, The Religion of Nature delineated* [hereafter "Clarke"] (London, 1725), 58–59; included in facsimile in Tweyman's edition of *RN*. John Clarke (1687–1734) was a classical scholar, educational reformer, and, for many years, master of the Hull grammar school. He is known not only for his critique of Wollaston's moral theory but for his critique of the moral theories of Samuel Clarke and Francis Hutcheson. For the latter critique see his *Foundation of Morality in Theory and Practice* (York, 1726).

arguments fail, I also show that their conclusion is true: Wollaston's moral theory conflicts with itself. I show this not through a new argument but through a long-neglected one: that of Thomas Bott (1688–1754), who reaches the same conclusion as Clarke and Hutcheson through a different line of thought.[4] Ultimately, I show that Wollaston's moral standard is not what some have thought it to be; that consequently, his philosophy withstands the best-known efforts to expose it as inconsistent; and further, that one of the least-known British moralists is more important than hitherto thought, in that he uncovers the inconsistency Clarke and Hutcheson try in vain to elicit.

WOLLASTON'S MORAL THEORY

Wollaston holds an unusual moral theory that has several components. Three of them are his propositional account of actions (A), his criterion for moral wrongness (W), and his account of how wrongness comes in degrees (D).[5]

(A) Actions, no less than sentences, signify truths or falsehoods. To do them is to act as if p is true, and hence to signify that p, where p is a proposition (*RN*, 8–13). For example, if some soldiers fire on another band of soldiers their act signifies the proposition "Those soldiers are our enemies" (*RN*, 8–9). Likewise, if I make a promise but then deliberately fail to keep it, I thereby signify that I did not make the promise (*RN*, 10, 16).

(W) Necessarily, an act is morally wrong if and only if it signifies a falsehood. In other words, necessarily, an act is wrong just in case it denies or conflicts with a truth, that is, just in case to do it would be to act as if this or that proposition, p, is true when in fact the negation of p is true (*RN*, 13–18, 20–25, 26, 28, 31, 138, 171).

(D) "The degrees of evil or guilt are as the importance and number of truths violated" (*RN*, 22). That is, the degree to which an act is wrong varies with the number and importance of the denied truths. Suppose, for instance, that an act conflicts with exactly one truth. Then the

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[4] Thomas Bott, *The Principal and Peculiar Notion Advanc'd in a Late Book, Intitled, The Religion of Nature Delineated; Consider'd and Refuted* [hereafter "Bott"] (London, 1725), 7. Bott was a Church of England clergyman, the rector of Whinburgh, in Norfolk, and later of Spixworth and Edgefield in that same county. He published, among other things, works of theology and critiques not only of Wollaston's book but of Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion* and William Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses*. Although he opposed the particulars of Wollaston's moral theory he resembled Wollaston in holding a form of moral rationalism or intellectualism. See particularly his sermon *Morality, founded in the Reason of Things, and the Ground of Revelation* (London, 1730).

[5] A fourth component, not crucial for my purposes, is Wollaston's view that a harmony exists between consistency with truth and respect for happiness—i.e., that every act that conflicts with a truth somehow diminishes or conflicts with happiness, and every act that conflicts with happiness somehow conflicts with truth (*RN*, 31, 38–40, 52, 65, 143).

more important that truth is, the more wrong the act is, and the less important that truth is, the less wrong the act is (*RN*, 21–22).

Many objections have been made to this moral theory; however, in this paper I examine just one. It asserts that thesis (D), Wollaston's view of how wrongness varies in degree, is inconsistent with his criterion for wrongness. Thesis (D) says that the wrongness of an act decreases (*ceteris paribus*) as the importance of the denied truths decreases. But this, according to Bott, Clarke, and Hutcheson, conflicts with Wollaston's view that inconsistency with truth is the essence of wrongness.

Since this objection concerns, in part, thesis (D), let me note that (D) raises a question: how do truths vary in importance? Although Wollaston thinks that variations in importance somehow relate to happiness (*RN*, 21), he is not clear on how they do so. In one place, for instance, he implies that truths vary in importance according to the degrees of happiness to which they explicitly refer (*RN*, 21). But this surely is a careless remark. In Wollaston's view an act is wrong if it denies "any truth, any true proposition whatsoever" (*RN*, 20; see also *RN*, 13, 31); and of course only a minority of truths explicitly mention happiness. Thus, Wollaston's remark, read in light of his overall theory, lacks relevance to most wrong deeds (because the truths they deny do not mention a degree of happiness). Either that, or it implies that the degree of wrongness those deeds possess is disconnected from the importance of the denied truths. Wollaston would welcome neither of these results, which is one reason I say that his remark is careless.[6]

So again, how do truths vary in importance? The fair way to read Wollaston is this: he holds that truths vary in importance depending not on whether they mention happiness, but on the extent to which comportment with them promotes happiness and non-comportment with them conflicts with (e.g., diminishes) happiness. Of course, some will say that the word "comportment" creates intolerable indeterminacy. They will say that owing to variations in human desires, one person's comportment with a given truth might involve acting a certain way, whereas the next person's might involve acting the opposite way.

Wollaston's account of actions provides a response to this objection. Whether the response succeeds is open to question; even so, it deserves mention. In Wollaston's view, every act signifies a proposition, and the proposition signified (rather than the aims of the agent) determines whether the act agrees with a given truth. Consider the truth that Ralf is lying in the street, grievously injured, and no one but me is there to help him. In Wollaston's view, any act on my part that involves neglecting to help Ralf signifies that Ralf's situation is not what it really is; consequently, it conflicts with the truth about

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[6] Further reasons emerge from other passages, e.g., *RN*, 10, 16, 19.

Ralf's plight (*RN*, 18).[7] Hence, no matter what my goals or desires, if I pass Ralf by without helping him I fail to comport with truth. Arguably, this shows that the word "comportment" does not inject intolerable indeterminacy into Wollaston's view of how truths vary in importance.[8]

HUTCHESON'S VERSION OF THE INCONSISTENCY OBJECTION

The objection I will address is that thesis (D) conflicts with Wollaston's criterion for wrongness. The best-known version of this objection comes from Francis Hutcheson:

> Mr. Wollaston acknowledges that there may be very little evil in some actions signifying falsehood.... It is objected to him that there is equal contrariety to truth in such actions as in the greatest villainy. He, in answer to it, really unawares gives up his whole cause. He must own that there may be the strictest truth and certainty about trifles; so there may be the most obvious falsehood signified by trifling actions. If, then, significancy of falsehood be the very same with moral evil, all crimes must be equal. He answers that crimes increase according to the importance of the truth denied; and so the virtue increases as the importance of the truths affirmed. Then,
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> > Virtue and vice increase as the importance of propositions affirmed or denied.
> > But signification of truth and falsehood does not so increase.
> > Therefore, virtue and vice are not the same with signification of truth or falsehood.
>
> (Hutcheson, 269–70)

Hutcheson's point is that in explaining how moral properties vary in degree, Wollaston undermines his criterion for wrongness. Hutcheson's argument for this point, the core of which is in the last four sentences of the quotation (the part that begins with "He answers"), can be reconstructed thus:

> If (D) is true, the moral wrongness of an act varies in degree according to the importance of the truths the act denies.

> The "significancy of falsehood" an act exhibits, that is, the property of denying or conflicting with truth, does not vary in degree according to the importance of the denied truths.

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[7] Given that, in Wollaston's view, the act is then wrong, the question arises whether Wollaston regards all moral duties as *perfect* duties. He does not; he clearly regards some as imperfect, such as the duty to pray and the duty to give to charity (*RN*, 17–18). In Wollaston's view, my failure to help Ralf *any* time Ralf is in the situation described is at odds with truth, and thus wrong, owing to the grievous nature of Ralf's injury together with the fact that no one but me is there to help him (*RN*, 18).

[8] This, at least, is what Wollaston would likely say. In fact, however, Wollaston's propositional account of actions (if true) goes only part way toward removing the problem of indeterminacy. Unless Wollaston gives us a non-capricious method for identifying the proposition(s) an action signifies, it seems to be anyone's guess whether an action—the breach of a bargain, say—signifies the falsehood "The bargain was not made" or instead signifies the truth "To breach this bargain is a way of cheating So-and-so." John Clarke takes Wollaston to task on this very point. See Clarke, 14–17. Clarke's argument is one of many I discuss in "Wollaston's Early Critics," forthcoming, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*.

> If the moral wrongness of an act, but not the significancy of falsehood the act exhibits, varies in degree according to the importance of the truths the act denies, then wrongness is not the same as significancy of falsehood.
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> Therefore, if (D) is true, moral wrongness is not the same as significancy of falsehood.

This argument is weak owing to a presupposition in its final two steps (and in the final sentence of the quotation). That presupposition is that according to Wollaston, wrongness is *identical* to significancy of falsehood. This presupposition is disputable for at least two reasons: first, there is no textual evidence for it; and second, an alternative reading of Wollaston is available, one that is more fair than Hutcheson's reading. On the alternative reading, reflected in (W), Wollaston's thesis is not that wrongness and significancy of falsehood are identical, but merely that they are *necessarily coextensive within the domain of actions*. That is, he holds that, necessarily, an act is wrong if and only if it signifies a falsehood.

Let me begin with the point about fairness. If Wollaston's thesis were an identity claim, it would commit him to an absurdity: that maps and street signs (not just the acts that produce them) can be morally wrong. Wollaston's thesis is not committed to this absurdity if it asserts, not that wrongness and significancy of falsehood are identical, but merely that they are necessarily coextensive in the realm of actions. Although this view implies that any *action* that signifies a falsehood is wrong, it does not imply that *anything* that signifies a falsehood, including any inaccurate map, is wrong. The fact that two properties, P and Q, are necessarily coextensive in a certain domain does not imply that in every domain in which Q occurs, it shares its extension (in whole or in part) with P. In the domain of triangles, *being equilateral* and *being equiangular* are necessarily coextensive; however, a pentagon can be equiangular without being equilateral. Likewise, within the domain of adult men, *being a bachelor* and *being unmarried* are necessarily coextensive; however, in other domains, to be unmarried is not to be a bachelor.

Let me now consider textual evidence. The following are Wollaston's most explicit statements of his standard for right and wrong:[9]

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[9] As some of these passages reveal, Wollaston is not always precise in his writing. So let me stress that, as (W) indicates, Wollaston holds that an act's inconsistency with truth is both *necessary* and *sufficient* for the act to be wrong. That he sees such inconsistency as *sufficient* for the act to be wrong is clear from the first of the passages below. That he sees such inconsistency as *necessary* for the act to be wrong is evident from the fact that if an act conflicts with no truth, then it is the kind of act Wollaston enjoins with his precept (in the fifth of the passages below) that "every intelligent, active, and free being should so behave himself, as by no act to contradict truth" (*RN*, 26). He later repeats this precept by saying that we must "so ... act that no truth may be denied by any act" (*RN*, 28) and that "the grand rule requires that what [a person] does should interfere with no truth" (*RN*, 171). This precept mentions just one condition for permissible action, which would be odd if Wollaston held that the conditions are multiple. Thus, Wollaston apparently holds that an act is permissible as long as it conflicts with no truth. This is to hold that inconsistency with truth is a necessary condition for wrong action.

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

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

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

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

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

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

None of these remarks requires us to read Wollaston as holding that wrongness (or "evil," as he uses that term)[10] is *identical* to significancy of falsehood. Consider the third remark, for instance. Wollaston knows that rightness and wrongness are properties of *actions*; so when he says that the difference between right and wrong is at bottom the same as the difference between true and false, we must understand him in a certain way. What he means, almost surely, is that the difference between right actions and wrong actions is at bottom the same as the difference between true actions and false actions (where "false actions" differ from "true actions" in signifying at least one falsehood). The latter statement does not imply that wrongness is *identical* to falseness. The statement is unobjectionable, and indeed a natural way of speaking, as long as every right action is necessarily a true action and every wrong action is necessarily a false one.

To take a second example, the term "formal *ratio*," which appears twice in the quoted remarks, is no doubt Wollaston's anglicization of the term "*ratio formalis*." However, the sentence "Inconsistency with the truth is identical to moral evil" would be a poor translation of the sentence "Inconsistency of men's acts with the truth is the *ratio formalis* of moral evil." A correct translation would be "Inconsistency with truth is the essence (or defining property) of

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

morally evil action."[11] The latter does not imply that inconsistency with truth is the *same* as moral evil. Instead, it says that an act's inconsistency with truth is necessary and sufficient for the act to be evil. This is just another way of stating (W), the view that, necessarily, an act is wrong just in case it conflicts with a truth.

In sum, to read Wollaston as I am proposing, as holding (W) rather than the view that wrongness and significancy of falsehood are identical, is to be fair to his theory and to respect the text of his explicit remarks. Also, as I will show, this reading armors his theory against Hutcheson's objection.

If (W) is Wollaston's moral principle, Hutcheson's objection requires revision. To ensure that it targets (W) we must replace its third and fourth steps with the following:

> If the moral wrongness of an act, but not the significancy of falsehood the act exhibits, varies in degree according to the importance of the truths the act denies, then within the domain of actions wrongness is not necessarily coextensive with significancy of falsehood.
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> Therefore, if (D) is true, then within the domain of actions moral wrongness is not necessarily coextensive with significancy of falsehood.

Henceforth, by "Hutcheson's third step" I mean the first of the above two propositions. Unlike the proposition it replaced (which follows from Leibniz's law), it demands an argument. For one thing, it is not obvious in the least; for another, it has the following form, many instances of which are false:

> If, within a domain, *D*, property *P*, but not property *Q*, varies in degree according to *R*, then within *D* property *P* is not necessarily coextensive with *Q*.

To be fair to this generalization and to capture its likely intent, let us stipulate that *D*, like the domain of actions, is a natural or familiar domain. That is, it is not a "contrived" domain, a domain that seldom would receive notice except in philosophical disputes.

Even if we make this assumption, the generalization we are considering is false. To see this, let *D* be the domain of (composite) material objects, and let *P* and *Q* be the properties of size and shape. Whereas size comes in degrees that vary with the surface area of the objects, shape does not. Unlike size, shape does not come in degrees. (Although an object's size can be greater than that of another object, no object has a *greater shape*, or *more shape*, than another.)

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[11] I owe these points about translation to Jason Eberl and Kevin Staley. Their advice agrees with the way I find "*ratio formalis*" used in the scholarly literature, including such literature in Wollaston's day. See, e.g., Peter Browne, *Things Divine and Supernatural Conceived by Analogy With Things Natural and Human* (London, 1733), 476.

Even so, within the domain in question here, size and shape are necessarily coextensive: an object cannot have one of those properties without the other.

Some might object that the properties in this example differ notably from the two properties referred to in Hutcheson's third step. First of all, not one, but both of the latter two properties come in degrees. Significancy of falsehood, for instance, varies in degree either with the number of falsehoods in question or with the degree of discrepancy between those falsehoods and the truth of the case. Secondly, in the case of wrongness and significancy of falsehood, it is plausible to say (if Wollaston's theory is true) that an act has the first of those properties *because* it has the second; it is not plausible to say the reverse. Things are different in the case of size and shape. It is no more plausible to say that an object has size because it has shape than it is to say that an object has shape because it has size.

Perhaps these differences exist, but I doubt that they drain my example of force.[12] But I can let this pass, for it is easy to find examples in which neither difference exists. For instance, prickliness and thorniness both come in degrees, and although it is plausible say that a plant is prickly *because* it is thorny, it is not plausible to say the reverse. So here we have an example that avoids the above objection.

All the same, the example serves my purpose. Returning to the generalization stated shortly ago, let D be the domain of plants, let P and Q be prickliness and thorniness, and let R be the sharpness of the thorns. The prickliness of a plant varies with the sharpness of the thorns that produce the prickliness. Other things being equal, if one plant has sharper thorns than another it is more prickly than the other. However, the thorniness of a plant does not vary with the sharpness of the thorns. If two plants have the same number of thorns per square inch they are equally thorny even if one of them has duller thorns than the other. (Of course, if those thorns are *too* dull they are not real thorns; to be genuine thorns they must be at least slightly sharp.) Even so, within the domain of plants prickliness and thorniness are necessarily coextensive: a plant cannot be prickly without being thorny; likewise, a plant cannot be thorny without being at least slightly prickly.[13]

Thus, as I said, not only is Hutcheson's third step far from obvious, but its form, meaning the generalization of which it is an instance, admits of exceptions. We thus have a right to withhold assent from it (and hence from Hutcheson's objection) until we see a strong argument for it. But such an

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[12] To say that the differences exist is unobjectionable; however, to say that they make my example ineffective is a different matter. It is an *ad hoc* maneuver unless backed by evidence.

[13] But what if the thorns are hooked rather than straight, so that we can grab the plant without being pricked? Or what if the thorns are so slender that they are best classified not as thorns but as spines or needles? Or, to take a third example, what if the plant, although smooth-stemmed, has a man-made cover from which many steel pins protrude, making the plant prickly independently of thorns? Objections of this kind, if they have any force at all (e.g., is a *hooked* protrusion really a thorn? is it really the *plant* that is prickly if the prickliness results from an artificial cover?), can be handled by slightly restricting and/or extending the meaning of "thorny" or "prickly."

argument is not easy to find, nor does Hutcheson try to provide one. As it stands, therefore, Hutcheson's objection to Wollaston's theory does not command assent.

CLARKE'S VERSION OF THE INCONSISTENCY OBJECTION

Let us go on to one of John Clarke's arguments:

> Supposing every immoral action or omission, and none but such, did interfere with or imply a denial of truth …, then indeed the interfering with or denying truth would be a certain criterion whereby to distinguish immoral action or omission from what is not so; but still the nature of immorality, the idea or formal ratio of it, … would not consist in that denial, but something else; for if it did, the degrees too of moral evil would depend upon that only: actions or omissions would be more or less immoral, more or less criminal, according as they denied more or less truth.... But here we have our author ... confounding and confuting his own doctrine; for he durst not pretend to measure the degrees of immorality by the number of truths violated alone, which he ought to have done, did immorality consist barely and precisely in the violation of truth.... He has thought fit to take in the importance of truths violated as well as number.... Which is a visible contradiction to his own doctrine. (Clarke, 58–59)

This argument, like Hutcheson's, assumes that Wollaston takes wrongness to "consist in," that is, to be *identical to*, inconsistency with truth. However, Wollaston holds merely that within the realm of actions, wrongness and inconsistency with truth necessarily have the same extension. So let us reconstruct Clarke's argument taking care not just to make it precise, but also to insert a variant of "necessarily coextensive in the realm of actions" where a more literal reconstruction would call for "identical." The result is this:

> If the degree of wrongness an act possesses varies with something besides the degree to which the act conflicts with truth—that is, with something besides the number of truths the act denies—then within the realm of actions wrongness and inconsistency with truth are not necessarily coextensive.

> If (D) is true, then the degree of wrongness an act possesses varies with something besides the number of truths the act denies. It varies also with the *importance* of those truths.

> Therefore, if (D) is true, then even if inconsistency with truth is a "criterion whereby to distinguish immoral action ... from what is not so" (i.e., even if, as a matter of contingent fact, wrongness and inconsistency with truth are shared by the same deeds), wrongness and inconsistency with truth are not necessarily coextensive, at least not in the realm of actions. In short, if (D) is true, (W) is false.

This argument is valid, and its second premise is true. However, its first premise is questionable. There is nothing obvious about it; also, it has the form of the second of the following generalizations, which is false.

> If, firstly, properties *P* and *Q* come in degrees and an *X* has those properties, and, secondly, the degree of *P* possessed by the *X* varies with something besides the degree of *Q* possessed by the *X*, then *P* and *Q* are not identical.

> If, firstly, properties *P* and *Q* come in degrees and an *X* has those properties, and, secondly, the degree of *P* possessed by the *X* varies with something besides the degree of *Q* possessed by the *X*, then within the domain of *X*'s, *P* and *Q* are not necessarily coextensive.

When Clarke wrote his argument he had the first of these generalizations in mind. Since that generalization derives from Leibniz's law, Clarke's first premise would need no defense if it followed from that generalization. However, given our reconstruction of Clarke's argument (required by a fair reading of Wollaston's position), the idea behind Clarke's first premise is not the first generalization but the second. And as already said, that generalization is false.

To see this, consider a variant of an earlier illustration. Let *P* and *Q* be prickliness and thorniness, and let *X* be a type of plant that has those properties. This makes the antecedent of the second generalization true. For instance, it makes the second part of that antecedent true because the prickliness of a plant varies not just with the degree of thorniness the plant possesses, but with the sharpness of the thorns. However, it does not make the *consequent* of the second generalization true. That consequent is false because within the domain of plants, prickliness and thorniness are necessarily coextensive.

The upshot is that Clarke's first premise is disputable. Consequently, the same goes for his objection as a whole.

BOTT'S VERSION OF THE INCONSISTENCY OBJECTION

Thomas Bott's version of the inconsistency objection is in his pamphlet *The Principal and Peculiar Notion Advanc'd in a Late Book, Intitled, The Religion of Nature Delineated*. There Bott advances several powerful objections to Wollaston's philosophy, exactly one of which is my concern here.[14] Although very brief, it makes a forceful point:

> [Wollaston] speaks ... of important truths, truths of weight, etc., which, I think, may be fairly understood as allowing that there are truths of *no* importance (as it is very certain

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[14] I discuss two of Bott's other objections, one aimed at (W), the other at (D), in "Wollaston's Early Critics."

> there are a great many ...). Yet how such a concession as this is consistent with [Wollaston's] definition of moral good and evil ... it will be very hard to say; or rather, anyone must plainly perceive an absurdity and inconsistency. (Bott, 7)

Unfortunately, what Bott says directly after this passage is more of a digression than an explanation of his key point. However, that key point is a good one: Wollaston must admit that many truths with which an act might conflict lack importance. But then, given that Wollaston holds (D), which says that the wrongness of an act decreases (*ceteris paribus*) as the importance of the denied truths decreases, he must reject (W), which implies that if an act denies a truth, even an unimportant truth, it is wrong. In sum, if Wollaston grants, as he must, that some truths with which an act might conflict have no importance, he must reject either (W) or (D); there is "an absurdity and inconsistency" in holding them jointly.

Bott thinks that once we grant that some truths with which an act might conflict lack importance, we "must plainly perceive" the conflict between (D) and (W). But in case the conflict is not so obvious, let me set out the argument that shows it:

> It is possible that the truths with which some acts conflict (assuming that acts can conflict with truths) lack any positive degree of importance.

> If every truth with which an act conflicts lacks a positive degree of importance, then the act has no positive degree of wrongness, which is to say that it's not wrong.

> Therefore, it is possible that some acts that conflict with truths are not wrong.

Bott's point is not that this argument is sound, but that Wollaston is committed to it. Wollaston is committed to its first step in that he cannot plausibly deny it. He is committed to its second step because he holds (D), according to which the wrongness of an act varies with the importance of the truths the act denies. Consequently, Wollaston is committed to the argument's conclusion, which rules out the view that, necessarily, an act is wrong just in case it conflicts with a truth. This is to rule out (W).

Bott's point is on the mark: Wollaston must abandon either (W) or (D); he cannot plausibly hold both. The strength of Bott's objection lies partly in its resistance to possible responses, three of which warrant attention.

The first response consists of rejecting the first step in the argument that claims to reveal a conflict between (D) and (W). This is to contend that every truth with which an act might conflict has importance.

Not only is this response possible, but Wollaston himself might make it. This is suggested by the anonymous author of a reply to Bott entitled *A Defence of Mr. Wollaston's Notion of Moral Good and Evil; In Answer to a Letter, in*

which It is said to be Considered and Refuted.[15] The author of this pamphlet quotes a remark by Wollaston that suggests, even if it does not entail, that every truth is at least slightly important:

> Though to act against truth in any case is wrong, yet, the degrees of guilt varying with the importance of things, in some cases the importance one way or the other may be so little as to render the crime *evanescent* or *almost* nothing. (*RN*, 31)

Our question, however, is not whether Wollaston would make the response, but whether the response succeeds. It does not, for it is not plausible that *every* truth with which an act might conflict has importance.[16] (Nor, by the way, does Wollaston attempt to show otherwise.) Let us grant for a moment that acts can conflict with truths. With a little effort we can invent or imagine ways in which an act might conflict with the truth (if it is a truth) that the Sahara desert contains an even number of sand grains. To take the most obvious case, a person might assert, merely on a whim, "The Sahara desert contains an odd number of sand grains." But in any ordinary context, it is not important whether the number of sand grains in the Sahara is even rather than odd—for example, whether it is five-hundred million billion, or exactly one grain less than that.

Let us go on to the second response. It says that Wollaston does not hold the second step in the argument that claims to show that (D) and (W) conflict. That is, he does not tacitly hold that an act is permissible if every truth with which the act conflicts lacks importance. Instead, he holds this:

> Every act that conflicts with a truth, even an act that conflicts solely with an unimportant truth, is morally wrong. Even so, if two truths are of unequal importance, then an act that conflicts solely with the more important truth is morally worse than an act that conflicts solely with the less important truth.

If Wollaston holds this view rather than the one Bott attributes to him, we should revise (D) to reflect that fact. As it stands, (D) contains the statements "The degrees of evil ... are as the importance and number of truths violated" and "The less important [the denied] truth is, the less wrong the act is." These statements suggest that if an act conflicts solely with truths that have no importance, the act is not wrong. This does not agree with the thesis set out above, particularly with the claim that an act is wrong even if it conflicts solely with an unimportant truth.

But this is a small matter; a more important issue is whether the above thesis, the one attributed to Wollaston by the response to Bott, is plausible. After all, to rescue Wollaston's theory from the inconsistency objection by

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[15] London, 1725, p. 7; included in facsimile in Tweyman's edition of *RN*.

[16] Bott sees that the issue here is not whether Wollaston would make the response, but whether the response is plausible. Hence his parenthetical comment: "as it is very certain there are a great many [truths of no importance]."

saddling him with an implausible position is not so much to rescue his theory as to surrender to the objection. So let us ask whether there is any merit to the view that although acts that conflict solely with an important truth are morally worse than acts that conflict solely with a less important truth, it is nonetheless true that *every* act that conflicts with a truth, even an unimportant truth, is morally wrong.

The idea behind this view is that subject to a key exception, the wrongness of an act decreases as the importance of the denied truth(s) decreases. Every decrease, however small, in the importance of the denied truth brings with it a decrease in the wrongness of the act. The key exception is that below a certain positive, even if very small, degree of importance, any further decrease in the importance of the denied truth brings no further decrease in the wrongness of the act. As a result, the degree of importance of the truth can reach zero without causing the act to be morally permissible.

An interesting view, but why accept it? Why think that wrongness decreases as the importance of the denied truth decreases, but then insist on the above exception? What reasons could there be for doing so, aside from *ad hoc* ones? In truth there are none at all, which is to say that the above view is implausible. I thus conclude that barring solid textual evidence (of which there is none) we should not attribute that view to Wollaston. We should grant that in virtue of his account of how wrongness comes in degrees, he is tacitly committed to the view Bott attributes to him: that if every truth with which an act conflicts lacks importance, the act is not wrong.

Let us proceed to the third response to Bott's objection. It consists of granting the argument that purports to show a conflict between (D) and (W), but then claiming that Wollaston's principle of right and wrong is not (W), but this: (W′) Necessarily, an act is wrong if and only if it conflicts with an *important* truth. This principle is unthreatened by the argument that claims to show a conflict between (D) and (W); thus, Wollaston could accept that argument without abandoning his moral principle.

This response fails. To say that Wollaston holds (W′) in place of (W) is to imply that Wollaston would accept the following thesis: An act could conflict with a truth without being wrong. Wollaston flatly rejects this thesis, as evident from many of his remarks:

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

> When I speak of acts inconsistent with truth I mean any truth, any true proposition whatsoever.... I would have everything taken to be what in fact and truth it is. (*RN*, 20)

> To act against truth in any case is wrong. (*RN*, 31)

> Nothing can be right that interferes with reason, and nothing can interfere with truth, but it must interfere with reason. (*RN*, 52)

> The grand rule requires that what he does should interfere with no truth. (*RN*, 171)

> Let us by no act deny anything to be true, which is true. (*RN*, 218)

Clearly, Wollaston holds that no act can conflict with a truth without being wrong. Also, this tenet is important to him; in his view, it is what makes his theory original and useful (*RN*, 6, 7, 25). Thus, the third response to Bott fails. Wollaston does not accept (W´) in place of (W), nor would he be willing to do so. To do so would be to abandon his philosophy, not to defend it.

I conclude that Bott's objection succeeds. Wollaston must admit that possibly, the truths with which some acts conflict (assuming that acts can conflict with truths) have no importance. He must admit this because he cannot plausibly do otherwise. And because Wollaston holds (D), he must also admit that if the truths with which an act conflicts lack importance, the act is not wrong. However, to admit these things is to admit that possibly, some acts that conflict with truths are not wrong. This rules out (W). The upshot is that (D) and (W) are not jointly acceptable.

CONCLUSION

We have seen three versions of the objection that Wollaston's moral theory is inconsistent—or more precisely, that insofar as Wollaston holds that wrongness decreases as the number and importance of the denied truths decreases, consistency requires him to abandon his standard for right and wrong. Although Clarke's and Hutcheson's versions of the objection fall short, Bott's hits the mark. Thus, a flaw that has long been thought to infect Wollaston's philosophy is indeed there; however, the best-known efforts to expose it are defective. A more successful effort comes from a very minor philosopher, the writings of whom are all but forgotten. This is historically significant in that it adds to our knowledge of eighteenth-century ethics. But it is not *merely* historically significant; it is philosophically significant as well. As philosophers, our business is not merely to accept or reject philosophical theories. It is to accept or reject them on the basis of sound reasons.[17]

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