

LOGICAL CRITICISMS OF THE THEORY IDENTIFYING DUTY WITH SELF-INTEREST

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(i) Hobbes's Vicious Circle {Why ought we to obey the sovereign}²

(a) Hobbes's version of the theory identifying duty with self-interest contains an inconsistency which his earliest opponents were quick to notice. He attempts to hold both that the distinction between right and wrong is simply that between what the sovereign orders and what he forbids (so that criticism of the sovereign's orders as morally wrong is out of the question), and at the same time that it is our duty to obey the sovereign. Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688) in his Treatise concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality, Bk. I, Ch.II, Sect. 3 (Selby-Bigge, "British Moralists", 816), asks where this original duty to obey the sovereign arises from. The sovereign himself might, of course, "make a positive law to require that others should be obliged, or bound to obey him." But "if they were not before obliged, then they could not be obliged by any positive law, because they were not previously bound to obey such a person's commands And if this were not morally good and just in its own nature before any positive command of God, that God should be obeyed by his creatures, the bare will of God himself could not beget an obligation upon any to do what he willed and commanded."

(b) {Why ought we to keep promises?}³ Hobbes, however, sometimes admits, at least as far as human sovereigns are concerned, that there is a duty more fundamental than that of obeying the sovereign, from which the latter duty arises, namely that of keeping the compact we have entered into in order to avoid the war of all against all. But this merely pushes the same difficulty further back; the question then becomes, "Why ought we to keep our word?" Lord Shaftesbury (1671-1713) dismisses one possible answer merely by stating it. "A man is obliged to keep his word. Why? Because he has given his word to keep it." (quoted in Dugald Stewart's Philosophy of the Active and Moral Powers of Man⁴, Bk. I, Ch. V, Sect. I). Cudworth, in his Intellectual System of the Universe (1678), Ch. V, Sect. V, subsect. 28, points out that we can no more found a duty to keep a promise on a promise to keep it than we can found a duty to obey the sovereign on his own order - both duties are only binding if they are types of action which are binding in their own nature apart from any promise or order. "These politicians tell us, that no man can be obliged but by his own act. But "were a man unobliged to any thing, then could he no way be obliged to stand to his own act". "Though it be true, that if there be natural justice, covenants will oblige; yet, upon the contrary supposition, that there is nothing naturally unjust, this cannot be unjust either, to break covenants." Shaftesbury makes the same point. "He who was free to any villainy before his contract, will and ought to make as free with his contract when he sees fit." (op. cit.) C.f. also C. S.

¹ Editors' note: This text has been edited by Peter Øhrstrøm and Martin Prior. The original MS is kept at Bodleian Library, The Prior Collection, Box 9. It is typed, and there are a few hand-written additions. It is included in a folder with the title "N.Z. MIMEO-ED CLASS NOTES for COURSE ON 'LOGIC & ETHICS' – various dates – and various others".

² Editors' note: The text in {} has been added by hand.

³ Editors' note: The text in {} has been added by hand.

⁴ Editors' note: The emphasis has added.

Lewis, in "The Abolition of Man" (1943), p. 21: "If nothing is self-evident, nothing can be proved. Similarly if nothing is obligatory for its own sake, nothing is obligatory at all."⁵

(c){ "Laws of Nature" }⁶ Hobbes sometimes avoids this difficulty by frankly describing contract-keeping, or whatever else he has fallen back on, as a "law of nature", i.e. as obligatory in its own nature, without further reasons being required. But once this is admitted, the whole theory that all our duties depend on the will of the sovereign or on our own promise falls to the ground. For "that which makes a promise obligatory in the state of nature must make all other acts of humanity as much our real duty and natural part." (Shaftesbury, op. cit.). Samuel Clarke, in his Discourse concerning the unchangeable obligations of natural Religion (1706), similarly draws attention to the "notorious absurdity and inconsistency in Mr. Hobbes's scheme" in that "he all along supposes some particular branches of the law of nature (which he thinks necessary for the foundation of some parts of his own doctrine) to be originally obligatory from the bare reason of things, at the same time that he denies and takes away innumerable others, which have plainly the same foundation of being obligatory as the former. Thus he supposes that in the state of nature, before any compact be made, every man's will is his own law, that nothing a man can do is unjust, and whatever mischief one man does to another, is no injury nor injustice. And yet at the same time he supposes, that in the same state of nature, men are by all means obliged to seek peace, and to enter into compacts to remedy the fore-mentioned mischiefs. Now if men are obliged by the original reason and nature of things to seek terms of peace, and to get out of the pretended natural state of war as soon as they can, how came they not to be obliged by the same reason and nature of things to live from the beginning in universal benevolence, and avoid entering into the state of war at all?" (Selby-Bigge, 515). C.S. Lewis makes the same point against modern systems which reject all morality which cannot be derived from some one obligation which is alone accepted as absolute. "If my duty to my parents is a superstition, then so is my duty to posterity. If justice is a superstition, then so is my duty to my country or my race. If the pursuit of scientific knowledge is a real value, then so is conjugal fidelity." (op. cit. p. 23).

(d) {Laws of nature ???⁷ theorems – indeed only means to end & to what end?}⁸ Hobbes attempts to avoid this inference by distinguishing his "laws of nature" from others as being not true laws at all, but "conclusions or theorems" which men may work out, "concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defence of themselves." (Leviathan, ch. 15). Men keep promises, etc., from fear of the war of all against all in which they are more likely than not to be losers. But in this case these "natural laws" of the "atheistic politicians" are merely "the laws of their own timorous and cowardly complexion; for they who have courage and generosity in them, according to this hypothesis, would never submit to such sneaking terms of equality and subjection, but venture for dominion, and resolve either to win the horse or lose the saddle." (Cudworth, Intellectual System, op. cit.). They merely "present the means we will have to adopt if we are to live at peace, and are mandatory only on those who wish to do so." (J. A. Passmore, "The Moral Philosophy of Hobbes", Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy, Apr. 1941). They can have no claim to obedience from those who prefer to take their chance in the state of war. {Hobbes never imagined the poss. of a Nietzsche}⁹.

⁵ Editors' note: Emphasis by hand.

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At the same time, "theorems" concerning the best means of preserving the state of war and obtaining success in it can have equally little claim to obedience from those who prefer to pay the price of living at peace. Theorems of this later-native¹⁰ sort, based on the same presumption of universal selfishness, were put forward as something more than theorems in the 19th century, when the centres of social power were shifting from the political to the economic field, as they had shifted in Hobbes's day from the ecclesiastical field to the political. 19th century captains of industry resented government interference with economic competition, and attempted to prove from the "iron laws" of economics that governments had a moral duty to leave them alone. Against this appeal to economic science, John Nevielle Keynes points out in "The Scope and Method of Political economy" (1904) Ch. II and Note A, that economic laws are only "theorems" that cannot take the place of moral precepts. "It is clear that we may on the one hand work out the consequences of laissez faire with the very object of discrediting it as a practical principle; or that we may on the other hand recognise the necessity of investigating the economic effects of governmental interference, while deploring the fact that instances of such interference are ever to be met with" (p. 70). Economic science alone cannot prescribe which practical path we shall take. "No solution of a practical problem, relating to human conduct, can be regarded as complete, until its ethical aspects have been considered. It is clear, accordingly, that practical discussions of an economic character cannot be isolated from ethics, except in so far as the aim is merely to point out the practical bearing of economic facts, without any attempt to lay down absolute rules of conduct." (pp. 60-1).

(ii) The Naturalistic Fallacy

Hobbes might have avoided exposing himself to Cudworth's criticism if he had consistently adopted an alternative which Cudworth mentions without dealing with it in detail, namely that of treating terms like "good" and "just" as "mere names without any signification, or names for nothing else, but willed and commanded" (Eternal and Immutable Morality, Bk. I, Ch.II, Sect. 1; Selby-Bigge, 813). So far as Hobbes does this, however, there is another objection to which he lays himself open. It is stated by Richard Price in his Review of the Principal Questions in Morals (1758).

(a) Dealing with "the schemes that found morality on self-love, on positive laws and compacts, or the Divine will," Price notes that "the phrase foundation of virtue has the different significations of an account or origin of virtue" (i.e. a definition of it); "of a consideration or principle inferring and proving it in particular cases" (i.e. a test of it); "and of a motive to the practice of it". The schemes in question, he says, "must either mean, that moral good and evil are only other words for advantageous and disadvantageous, willed and forbidden. Or they relate to a very different question; that is, not to the question what is the nature and true account of virtue; but, what is the subject-matter of it" – i.e., not to the question of what virtue means, but to that of what particular types of action are virtuous (Selby-Bigge, 586).

(b) If what they assert is that the only sorts of things that are virtuous are self-interest or obedience to laws or compacts, then such objections as Cudworth's apply to them. "All laws, will, and compacts suppose antecedent right to give them effect."

¹⁰ Editors' note: This should perhaps have been 'alternative'.

(c) If what they assert is that virtue means self-interest or obedience etc., then if this were true “it would be palpably in any case to ask, whether it is right to obey a command, or wrong to disobey it; and the propositions, obeying a command is right, or producing happiness is right, would be most trifling, as expressing no more than that obeying a command, is obeying a command, or producing happiness, is producing happiness. (Selby-Bigge 586-7). {This mode of refutation is also employed by earlier writers, e.g. Francis Hutcheson, in a work that appeared in 1725, says that “to call the laws of the Supreme Deity good, or holy, or just, if all goodness, holiness and justice be constituted by laws, or the will of a superior any way revealed, must be an insignificant tautology, amounting to no more than this, ‘That God wills what he wills’.” (Selby-Bigge 173).} ¹¹ When Hobbes argued that our duty, and our only duty, is to obey the sovereign from fear of anarchy, he certainly meant to assert more than the “trifling” proposition that obeying the sovereign from fear of anarchy is obeying the sovereign from fear of anarchy; but this is all he could have meant if he had avoided exposing himself to Cudworth's criticism by consistently holding that “duty” is only another name for obedience to the sovereign from fear of anarchy.

Bentham was more definite than Hobbes in holding that ethical terms should either be abandoned altogether or regarded as mere synonyms for non-ethical ones. He oscillated between these two alternatives. In his Deontology he has an attack on the word “ought”, of which he finally says “If the use of the word is admissible at all, it ‘ought’ to be banished from the vocabulary of morals.” In his Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1780) he adopts the other alternative. “Of an action that is conformable to the principle of utility” - i.e. that tends to augment the happiness of the party or parties concerned – “one may always say either that it is one that ought to be done, or at least that it is not one that ought not to be done. When thus interpreted, the words ought, and right and wrong, and others of that stamp, have a meaning; when otherwise, they have none. (Ch. I, Sect. X; Selby-Bigge, 363): Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900), in his Methods of Ethics, Bk. I, Ch. II, Sect. I (7th edition, p. 26n), substitutes this definition in Bentham's earlier assertion that his fundamental principle “states the general happiness of all those whose interest is in question as being the right and proper end of human action”; and observes, in the spirit of Price, that “the proposition that it is conducive to the general happiness to take general happiness as an end of action, though not exactly a tautology, can hardly serve as the fundamental principle of a moral system.”

Sidgwick's pupil G. E. Moore, in his Principia Ethica (1903), repeats this criticism of those who attempt to “foist upon us such an axiom as ‘Pleasure is the only good’, or ‘The good is the desired’ on the pretence that this is ‘the very meaning of the word’.” (p. 7)

(a) “It may be true”, he says, “that all things which are good are also something else.” Whether or not an object is, for example, pleasant, may be an infallible test of whether or not it is good. “But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good.” This notion is termed by Moore the naturalistic fallacy.

(b) It is a fallacy because the advocates of the view that “pleasure is good”, for example, never “merely mean ‘pleasure is pleasure’ and no more than that.” (p. 12).

(c) It is a fallacy also because arguments about whether the good is pleasure or something else are never merely disputes about the meaning of the word. “They are all so anxious to persuade us that what they call good is what we really ought to do”, and if their disputes were really about the meaning of a word, this would reduce their method of persuasion to the absurd argument, “Do, pray, act so, because the word ‘good’ is generally used to denote actions of this nature.” (ibid.)

¹¹ Editors' note: The text in {} has been added by hand.

(iii) Positive and Normative

Even if Hobbes's account of what our duty is be dismissed as groundless except on the basis of a definition of "duty" which would make it trivial, his thesis that all men are entirely self-interested remains untouched by criticisms of the type so far outlined. Criticisms of it have been made; but the question as to whether or not men are as self-interested as Hobbes maintains, though not merely verbal, is not strictly speaking, an ethical one, but is rather a psychological question. Ethics is concerned with what ought to be, or what ought to be done, not merely with what is, or what is the case. It is a normative science, investigating "norms" or standards, not a positive science, like psychology or sociology, investigating facts; or if it does investigate facts, they are facts of the form "x ought to be" or "x ought to be done", and not of the form "x has happened", or is happening, or will happen. It is to be distinguished even from the psychological and sociological study of men's belief in ethical standards and of their observance of them. (Whether lying is wrong, or why it is wrong, are ethical questions; whether New Zealanders believe lying is wrong, and how they have come to believe or disbelieve it, psychological.)

Neither Hobbes nor his first opponents made a very clear distinction between ethical and psychological questions, though this distinction was appreciated and even exaggerated by the so-called "licentious" (more accurately the misanthropic) school of Mandeville, Swift and Rochefoucauld. Mandeville's misanthropy was a violent reaction against the rosy picture of human nature as it is which Shaftesbury thought it necessary to oppose to the one drawn by Hobbes, rather than a "licentious" view of what human nature ought to be. "The generality of moralists," he says in his Search into the Nature of Society (1723), "have hitherto agreed that there could be no virtue without self-denial, but a late author is of a contrary opinion, and imagines that men without any trouble or violence upon themselves may be naturally virtuous ... and that a man of sound understanding, by following the rules of good sense, may govern himself by his reason with as much ease and readiness as a good rider manages a well trained horse by the bridle ... His Lordship's notions I confess are generous and refined: they are a high compliment to human-kind, and capable by the help of a little enthusiasm of inspiring us with the most noble sentiments concerning the dignity of our exalted nature: what a pity it is that they are not true!" Of Shaftesbury personally he says, "A man that has been brought up in easy and affluence, if he is of a quiet indolent nature, learns to shun everything that is troublesome, and chooses to curb his passions, more because of the inconveniences that arise from the eager pursuit after pleasure, than any dislike he has to sensual enjoyments; and it is possible that person educated under a great philosopher, who was a mild and good-natured as well as able tutor, may in such happy circumstances have a better opinion of his inward state than it really deserves, and believe himself virtuous, because his passions lie dormant. He may form fine notions of the social virtues, and the contempt of death, write well of them in his closet, and talk eloquently of them in company, but you shall never catch him in fighting for his country, or laboring to retrieve any national losses."

David Hume, in his Inquiry concerning the Principles of Morals (1751), Sect. VI, Part I, sums up the true character of Mandeville's misanthropy. "In this kingdom, such continued ostentation, of late years, has prevailed among men in active life with regard to public spirit, and among those in speculative with regard to benevolence; and so many false pretensions to each have been, no doubt, detected, that men of the world are apt, without any bad intentions, to discover a sudden incredulity on the head of those moral endowments, and sometimes absolutely to deny their existence and

reality.” Adam Smith, in his Treatise of Moral Sentiments (1759), Part VII, Sect. II, Ch. IV, observes that Mandeville exaggerates the gulf between men’s professions and their performance not merely by giving a dark picture of that performance but by judging it by a more ascetic moral code than they really profess. ”The ingenious sophistry of his reasoning is here covered by the ambiguity of language. There are some of our passions which have no other names except those which mark the disagreeable and offensive degree. The spectator is more apt to take notice of them in this degree than in any other. When they shock his own sentiments, he is necessarily obliged to attend to them, and is from thence naturally led to give them a name. When they fall in with the natural state of his own mind, he is very apt to overlook them altogether, and either gives them no name at all, or, if he give them any, it is one which marks rather the subjection and restraint of the passion, than the degree which it is still allowed to subsist in. Thus the common names of the love of pleasure and of the love of sex, denote a vicious and offensive degree of those passions. The words temperance and chastity, on the other hand, seem to rather the restraint and subjection they are kept under, than the degree which they are still allowed to subsist in. When he can show, therefore, that they still subsist in some degree, he imagines that he has entirely demolished the reality of the virtues of temperance and chastity, and shewn them to be mere impositions upon the inattention and simplicity of mankind. (See appendix p. 9)

Immanuel Kant, who is noted among moral philosophers for his rigour, displays in Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785), Sect. II, a marked sympathy with those who hold that the “disposition to act from pure duty” has never been actually exemplified in human life, and that all our actual behavior is to be ascribed to “a more or less refined self-love.” “without being an enemy of virtue, a cool observer, one that does not mistake the wish for good, however lively, for its reality, may sometimes doubt whether true virtue is actually found anywhere in the world.” This does not mean, however, that moral distinctions have no authority. All it means is that “nothing can secure us from falling away altogether from our ideas of duty, or maintain in the soul a well-grounded respect for its law, but the clear conviction that although there should never have been actions which really sprang from such pure sources, yet whether this or that takes place is not at all the question; but that reason of itself, independent of all experience, ordains what ought to take place, that accordingly actions of which perhaps the world has hitherto never given an example, the feasibility even of which might be very much doubted by one who founds everything on experience, are nevertheless inflexibly commanded by reason; that, e.g. even though there might never yet have been a sincere friend, yet not a whit the less is pure sincerity in friendship required of every man.”

(iv) Conformity of Nature {natural and artificial law and naturalistic and non-naturalistic ethics}¹². Confusion between the positive and the normative is very apt to arise from the use in Ethics of the terms “nature” and “natural”. Since ancient Greek times the view that moral distinctions are the product of convention has been contrasted with the view that they are “natural”; and the “positive” law or laws decreed by authority or convention in particular societies have been contrasted with “natural” law or laws, or with the law or law of “nature.” In this context, “natural” is simply the opposite of “artificial”, and a “natural” law in this sense may still be a description of what ought to be done rather than of what actually happens. We have seen this use of the term in Cudworth. But there is a tendency also to contrast the “natural” with the normative; “nature” is the sum of what actually is and happens, and a “natural” morality or “naturalistic” ethic is one in which the distinction between what is and what ought to be is in some way made to disappear, and in which

¹² Editors’ note: The text in {} has been added by hand.

wrong action is thought of as action which conflicts in some way, not with what ought to be done, but with something else which actually happens and is.

(a){ All ethics not in sense that we can't jump outside nature, but still in this limit can have normative standards}¹³. Sidgwick, in the course of a critical discussion of theories of this kind in Bk. I, Ch. VI., Sect. 2, of his "Methods of Ethics" admits that "in a certain sense every rational man must 'conform to nature'; that is, in aiming at any ends, he must adapt his efforts to the particular conditions of his existence, physical and psychical." But the formula is of no ethical use unless it shows us how we are to "go beyond this, and conform to 'Nature' in the adoption of an ultimate end or paramount standard of right conduct." (7th ed. p. 80).

(b) {If the good = what we can only do anyway there can be no normative science}¹⁴ If the "Nature" to which we are to conform in this sense comprises everything that is and happens, then the standard is plainly one which cannot tell us how we ought to act, because however we act it is impossible to violate it. For Hobbes and Bentham, for example, self-interest was "natural" in the sense that no men are ever actuated by any other motive. But "if, as Bentham affirms, 'on the occasion of every act he exercises, every human being is' inevitably 'led to pursue that line of conduct which, according to his view of the case, taken by him at the moment, will be in the highest degree contributory to his own happiness,' then the proposition that he 'ought' to pursue that line of conduct becomes clearly incapable of being affirmed with any significance." (Sidgwick, Methods of Ethics, Bk. I, Ch IV, Sect. I; 7th ed., p.41).

Such a theory might use the word "right" as we use it when we speak of the right answer to a question, for action which succeeds in securing the greatest pleasure because it is "guided by a correct calculation of consequences"; but "since it is bound to assume that every one must do his utmost to calculate results correctly it cannot say that we ought to calculate them correctly." (E.F. Carritt, The Theory of Morals, 1928, p. 13). C.S. Lewis similarly criticizes one version of the theory that the right ends of action are set for us by "instinct". "Is it maintained that we must obey instinct, that we cannot do otherwise? But if so, why this stream of exhortation to drive us where we cannot help going?" (op.cit. p. 18) {Ethics doesn't acquire more (or less) validity when we see how it has evolved} Cf. also the comment of the 19th century evolutionary biologist, T.H. Huxley, in his Romanes Lectures on Evolution and Ethics (1893) on the view that the sentiments which urge us to moral action acquire new authority from the fact that we may give a "natural" explanation of how they have arisen. "The propounders of what are called the 'ethics of evolution', when the 'evolution of ethics' would usually better express the object of their speculations, adduce a number of more or less interesting facts and more or less sound arguments, in favour of the origin of our moral sentiments, in the same way as other natural phenomena, by a process of evolution. I have little doubt that they are on the right track; but as the immoral sentiments have no less been evolved, there is, so far, as much natural sanction for the one as the other. The thief and the murderer follow nature as much as the philanthropist. Cosmic evolution may teach us how the good and the evil tendencies of man may have come about; but in itself, it is incompetent to furnish any better reason why what we call good is preferable to what we call evil than we had before." (Collected Essays by T.H. Huxley, Vol. IX, pp. 79-80). {Right action is not following¹⁵ some particular part of nature – for why ought we to do so?}¹⁶

¹³ Editors' note: The text in {} has been added by hand.

¹⁴ Editors' note: The text in {} has been added by hand.

¹⁵ Editors' note: This reading is a bit uncertain.

¹⁶ Editors' note: The text in {} has been added by hand.

(c) If right action is said to consist in imitating, obeying or conserving some part of nature, the selection of this part always raises questions of the type already considered under Head (i) (“Hobbes's Vicious Circle”). It is always necessary to appeal beyond nature in order to make this selection. “If we did not bring to the examination of our instincts a knowledge of their comparative dignity we could never learn it from them.” Since each instinct, if you listen to it, will claim to be gratified at the expense of all the rest”, “this knowledge cannot itself be instinctive: the judge cannot be one of the parties judged.” “The idea that, without appealing to any court higher than the instincts themselves, we can yet find grounds for preferring one instinct above its fellows, dies very hard. We grasp at useless words: we call it the ‘basic’, or ‘fundamental’, or ‘primal’, or ‘deepest’ instinct. It is of no avail. Either these words conceal a value judgment passed upon the instinct and therefore not derivable from it, or else they merely record its felt intensity, the frequency of its operation, and its wide distribution. If the former, the whole attempt to base value upon instinct has been abandoned: if the latter, these observations about the quantitative aspects of a psychological event lead to no practical conclusion.” (C.S. Lewis, op.cit. p. 19).

(v) Origin and Validity.

A form of the appeal to “Nature” to which Sidgwick gives special attention, because it involves a special absurdity, is the view that we are to take our instructions from the most primitive elements in our nature. “It has often been assumed that if our moral faculty can be shown to be ‘derived’ or ‘developed’ out of other pre-existent elements of mind or consciousness, a reason is thereby given for distrusting it; while if, on the other hand, it can be shown to have existed in the human mind from its origin, its trustworthiness is thereby established”. “I cannot doubt”, Sidgwick comments, “that every one of our cognitive faculties has been derived or developed, though a gradual process of physical change, out of some lower life in which cognition, properly speaking, had no place. On this view, the distinction between ‘original’ and ‘derived’ reduces itself to that between ‘prior’ and ‘posterior’ in development: and the fact that the moral faculty appears somewhat later in the process of evolution than other faculties can hardly be regarded as an argument against the validity of moral intuition. Indeed such a line of reasoning would be suicidal; as the cognition that the moral faculty is developed is certainly later in development than moral cognition, and would therefore, by this reasoning, be less trustworthy.” (Methods of Ethics, Bk. III, Ch. I, Sect. 4; 7th ed. p. 212 & n.).

Mill is guilty of this fallacy when he suggests that the ultimate aim we should adopt is that set by our desire for our own happiness, because this has always existed, while such sentiments as disinterested concern for virtue have been derived from it by association of ideas. The process of development which he traces is just as likely to be a means by which we are led to discover a real value in virtue which we had not previously appreciated, as a means by which we are led into error on the subject.

Not only the properly ethical question as to the validity of our moral judgments, but also the psychological question as to the existence of our moral sentiments, is independent of what Sidgwick calls the “psychogonical” question as to their mode of origination and growth. If it is a fact that a disinterested concern for virtue has arisen by association from a concern for our own happiness, this cannot alter the fact that a disinterested concern for virtue exists now, and certainly cannot by any scientific miracle make this fact consistent with its direct contradictory as held by Hobbes and Bentham.

This appeal to the primitive is also exemplified by another argument brought forward last century, beside the “economic” one mentioned under Head (i), in favour of the “rugged individualism.” This is the argument that “because, on the whole, animals and plants have advanced in perfection of organisation by means of the struggle for existence and the consequent ‘survival of the fittest’; therefore men in society, men as ethical beings, must look to the same process to help

them towards perfection.” This argument may take two forms – it may assert so far as our ends as moral beings differ from those achieved in non-human nature, they are bad ends and should be altered; or it may assert that non-human nature knows better than we do how to achieve the type of perfection of which our existing moral code approves. In its second form the argument is criticised by T. H. Huxley on the grounds that so far as non-human nature may be said to have ends, they are entirely different from those which the common rules of morality set before human beings. He attributes the confusion between the two types of ends to “the unfortunate ambiguity of the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’. ‘Fittest’ has a connotation of ‘best’; and about ‘best’ there hangs a moral flavour. In cosmic nature, however, what is ‘fittest’ depends upon the conditions. If our hemisphere were to cool again, the survival of fittest might bring about, in the vegetable kingdom, a population of more and more stunted and humbler and humbler organisms, until the ‘fittest’ that survived humbler and humbler organisms, until the ‘fittest’ that survived might be nothing but lichens, diatoms, and such microscopic organisms as those which give red snow its colour.” “The practice of what is ethically best – what we call goodness or virtue – involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence. In place of ruthless self-assertion it demands self-restraint; in place of thrusting aside, or treading down, all competitors, it requires that the individual shall not merely respect, but shall help his fellows; its influence is directed, not so much to the survival of the fittest, as to the fitting of as many as possible to survive.” (op.cit. pp. 80—82.)

Man’s evolutionary successor is as likely to resemble a “lichen, diatom or microscopic organism” as the “blond beast” glorified by Nietzsche, and even if he were a “blond beast” there would be no logical compulsion to make his standards our own.

Appendix

Mandeville’s attitude to the reality of moral distinctions is not without ambiguity. He upholds the obligation of self-denial in order to show how vile men are in their complete failure to live up to it; but he also upbraids men for their stupidity in attempting to live up to it, as if it had no objective authority at all, being merely imposed on men by astute politicians. He contradicts himself, and tries to “have it both ways”, not, like Hobbes, from an anxiety to protect the State from criticism, but from a determination to expose the baseness of mankind. F.R. Leavis analyses a similar ambiguity in Swift, in an essay on “The Irony of Swift” in the collection “Determinations”. He suggests that the only positive aim behind Swift’s destructive energy is the satisfaction of his sense of his own power. The same might be said of Mandeville. It is sometimes useful to be cynical about cynics. At the same time, this “private vice” of Mandeville’s is a “public benefit” in so far as he demonstrates with a fierce clarity the impossibility of ever being justly confident of the purity of our own motives.