Introduction

Are human beings naturally good or evil? Are we naturally drawn to virtue or to vice? Is it natural for us to do the right thing, or must we resist something in our nature in order to do what is right? Call this the Human Nature Question.

Most of us have asked the Human Nature Question at one time or another. Sometimes it's other people's behavior that prompts us to ask it. Sometimes it's our own.

We may ask the Question when we hear of monstrous acts – of torture, genocide, slaughter. How could people do such things to each other? Is such behavior rooted in something natural to human beings, or is it a perversion of what we naturally are? We may ask the Question when we hear of acts of great generosity and self-sacrifice. Are people who do such things shining examples of the basic goodness of human beings, or can their acts be explained by factors less flattering to humanity? We may ask the Question when we scrutinize our own relatively normal conduct and motivation. What leads us to act in the ways we do? Is it something we should be proud of or something that is not at all to our credit?

Our answer to the Question will greatly influence our view of ourselves and others, and it can play a leading role in our conception of morality, of what it means to live as we ought. It should come as no surprise, therefore, to find that responses to the Question have been central to accounts of morality and human nature throughout the ages, from ancient Greek moral philosophy to medieval Christian theology to modern European political theory to contemporary sociobiology.

In this study, I examine how the Human Nature Question shaped moral thought in Great Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In Part One, I describe the Negative Answer (i.e., human nature is basically evil) of the English Calvinists and the Positive Answer (i.e., human nature is basically good) of the Cambridge Platonists. In Part Two, I explore the Positive Answer of the third Earl of Shaftesbury. In Part Three, I explore the

Positive Answer of Francis Hutcheson. And in Part Four, I explain how David Hume undermined the Question and thus cleared the way for a "science" of morality and human nature "built on a foundation almost entirely new" (THN Introduction 6).

By focusing on the Human Nature Question, I believe, we will gain a particularly clear view of some of the most important features of the changing philosophical landscape of the early modern period. Such a focus will elucidate the rise of religious liberty and the increased use of empirical observation in accounts of morality and human nature. It will reveal a Copernican Revolution in moral philosophy, a shift from thinking of morality as a standard against which human nature as a whole can be measured to thinking of morality as itself a part of human nature.

And, perhaps most significantly, it will help explain the birth of modern secular ethics – of ethical thought that is entirely independent of religious and theological commitment. In 1600, almost all English-speaking moral philosophy was completely embedded in a Christian framework. But by 1700, some philosophers had begun to develop moral positions that, while still fundamentally theistic, lacked any distinctively Christian elements. And by 1750, still other philosophers had begun to advance accounts of morality that were disengaged not only from Christianity but also from belief in God. This transition was one of the most momentous in the history of European ideas, and an explanation of how it occurred will uncover the roots of contemporary secular positions on the origins of morality as well as the roots of some of the deepest worries about those positions.

I should make it clear, however, that this study does not constitute anything like a comprehensive map of the entire territory of early modern moral philosophy. My goal is to chart a path that allows for a detailed examination of some of the most significant landmarks of ethical thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But there are other landmarks, equally significant, that this path does not offer a close view of. So while I say a lot about the Cambridge Platonists, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume, I say relatively little about other philosophers – Hobbes, Locke, Clarke, Bayle, Toland, Butler (the list is very incomplete) – who were just as important.[1] I have done this because I think the works I do discuss form an illustratively coherent story line, and I did not think I could do an adequate job of also handling those other works within the confines of a single book.[2]

Discussion of primary, historical sources occupies almost all of my main text. There are many valuable secondary sources on this material, but I have placed my discussion of them in the endnotes. I followed this procedure not because I think the recent scholarship unworthwhile but because I found it difficult to include discussion of it in the main text and still present a readable version of the philosophical story I was trying to tell.

Some of the chapters are descendants of previously published articles of mine. Parts of Chapters 1 and 5 derive from "The Religious Rationalism of

Benjamin Whichcote," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27 (1999): 271–300. Parts of Chapter 4 derive from "Rationalism, Sentimentalism, and Ralph Cudworth," *Hume Studies* 30 (2004): 149–82. Parts of Chapter 9 derive from "Shaftesbury's Two Accounts of the Reason to Be Virtuous," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38 (2000): 529–48. Parts of Chapter 14 derive from "Nature and Association in the Moral Theory of Francis Hutcheson," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 12 (1995): 281–301. Parts of Chapter 15 derive from "A Philosopher in His Closet: Reflexivity and Justification in Hume's Moral Theory," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1996): 231–56. Parts of Chapter 17 derive from "Fantastick Associations and Addictive General Rules: A Fundamental Difference between Hume and Hutcheson," *Hume Studies* 22 (1996): 23–48. And parts of chapter 18 derive from "Hume's Progressive View of Human Nature," *Hume Studies* 26 (2000): 529–48.

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PART ONE

WHICHCOTE AND CUDWORTH

1

The Negative Answer of English Calvinism

Ralph Cudworth was born in 1617 in Somerset, England. His father, also named Ralph, was "a man of genius and learning" who was rector of the parish and chaplain to the king (Birch vii). Most importantly for our purposes, the elder Cudworth was a devout Calvinist. Describing the Calvinism of Cudworth's father is the goal of this chapter.[1]

A defining feature of the English Calvinism the elder Cudworth preached and practiced was an ardent belief in the sinfulness of all humans. According to this Calvinist view, humans had originally been created pure and good but through original sin had fallen to the depths of degradation. As a result, each and every human is now corrupt through and through. The corruption of the Fall, moreover, was so complete, afflicting as it did all of our faculties, that we now lack even the ability to do anything to improve our degenerate state. Human sinfulness is inherent and ineradicable. All people deserve eternal damnation in hell. And when the elder Cudworth spoke of hell, he would have done so in vivid and horrifying terms – as an actual place of the most extreme, never-ending torment.

The English Calvinists did not believe that everyone would go to hell. They thought that God had predetermined that some few people – the elect – would be saved. But the vast majority would be damned. And, crucially, even the elect did not *deserve* salvation. They just happened to be lucky enough to win, as though in a lottery, God's undeserved grace. Sin suffused the soul of the elect and reprobate alike.

The elder Cudworth's belief in the inherent and ineradicable sinfulness of humanity constitutes a perfectly clear Negative Answer to the Human Nature Question. All human beings, on this Calvinist view, are ineluctably drawn toward evil, wickedness, and vice. So to the question of whether humans are basically good, the elder Cudworth and his Calvinist fellows would have responded with a resounding No.

To grasp fully the depth and intensity of this Negative Answer, we need to go beyond a bare statement of its propositional content. We need to

appreciate how the belief in inherent and ineradicable sin would have saturated the daily lives of English Calvinist families, creating in children such as young Ralph Cudworth an intimate and constant awareness of their own corruption.

We can sketch a picture of how the Negative Answer would have colored Cudworth's upbringing by looking to the writings of William Perkins, the most influential Calvinist thinker in England at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Cudworth's father was a close follower of Perkins, editing a number of his works and publishing a supplement to one of his biblical commentaries, and Perkins handpicked the elder Cudworth to be his successor as minister of St. Andrews' Church in Cambridge. It seems safe to assume, therefore, that young Ralph Cudworth would have grown up in a household governed by the principles Perkins espoused.

A work of Perkins that offers a clear view of how Calvinist principles would have been instilled in a seventeenth-century English household is his catechism, "Foundation of Christian Religion Gathered into Six Principles," which young children such as Ralph would have been made to memorize and recite. The catechism begins with the question "What doest thou believe concerning God?", to which the child responds, innocuously enough, "There is one God, creator and governor of all things, distinguished into the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost" (Perkins 146). Immediately after that innocuous exchange, however, the Negative Answer, in full Calvinist armor, comes charging onto the scene. For the second question is "What doest thou believe concerning man and concerning thine own self?" And to this the child must answer, "All men are wholly corrupted with sin through Adam's fall and so are become slaves of Satan and guilty of eternal damnation" (Perkins 146). The child is then made to elaborate on the complete corruption of his soul, explaining that he "is by nature dead in sin as a loathsome carrion, or as a dead corpse [that] lieth rotting and stinking in the grave, having in him the seed of all sins" (Perkins 150). Corruption and sin, the child must continue, is in "every part of both body and soul, like as a leprosy that runneth from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot" (Perkins 151). And just in case the message has still not gotten through, the child is then made to show "how every part is corrupted with sin" by repeating the following:

> First, in the mind there is nothing but ignorance and blindness concerning heavenly matters. Secondly, the conscience is defiled, being always either benumbed with sin, or else turmoiled with inward accusations and terrors. Thirdly, the will of man only willeth and lusteth after evil. Fourthly, the affections of the heart, as love, joy, hope, desire, etc., are moved and stirred to that which is evil to embrace it, and they are never stirred unto that which is good unless it be to eschew it. Lastly, the members of the body are the instruments and tools of the mind for the execution of sin. (Perkins 151)

But the catechism doesn't leave matters there. It goes on to ask the child, "What hurt comes to man by his sin?" And the child must respond by reciting the various parts of the "curse of God" to which all humans are "continually subject" because of their sinfulness (Perkins 151–2). The curse of God the child is made to describe consists of pains in this life and damnation in the next. The pains of this life include all the unpleasant, unfortunate, and tragic events that can afflict a person – disaster, disease, and the death of loved ones. The catechism thus impresses on the child the idea that everything bad that happens to him is warranted punishment for his sin. The catechism also impresses on the child the horrors of "eternal perdition and destruction in hell-fire." Indeed, the final part of the catechism – the last bit the child must recite, the bit that will echo in his mind when the lesson is complete – is the following description of the three things that await all reprobates:

> [F]irst, a perpetual separation from God's presence; secondly, fellowship with the devil and his angels; thirdly, an horrible pang and torment both of body and soul arising of the feeling of the whole wrath of God, poured forth on the wicked for ever, world without end; and if the pain of one tooth for one day be so great, endless shall be the pain of the whole man, body and soul for ever. (Perkins 167)

The catechism does also explain that some people will reach heaven. These heaven-bound people will, of course, accept Jesus Christ as their savior. But even acceptance of Christ is inextricably linked to an intimate and constant awareness of corruption. For the catechism teaches the child that he can have real faith in Christ only after he has fully embraced the sharp sorrow of his own sin. Only if the child's inner being becomes so "touched with a lively feeling of God's displeasure" that he "utterly despairs of salvation in regard of anything in himself" and acknowledges that what he actually deserves is "shame and confusion eternally" – only then can he truly appreciate the nature of Christ's sacrifice (Perkins 157).

So the English Calvinists emphasized the importance of an internal sense of sin. They insisted that the essence of Christianity – the essence of true acceptance of Christ – involved not merely agreement with statements of Calvinist doctrine, but also a vital and fulsome *feeling* of one's own corruption. This emphasis on an internal sense or feeling will be highly significant in our later discussion. For we will see that while Whichcote and Cudworth eventually repudiated the Calvinist belief in inherent and ineradicable sinfulness, they always remained firmly committed to the notion that what is most important to religion and morality is an individual's internal state of mind.

Unfortunately, most people (according to the English Calvinists) do not cultivate in themselves the proper internal state. They perform the requisite external actions, going to church, reciting their prayers, taking the sacraments, and refraining from "gross and palpable sins" (Perkins 286).

And they think that these activities are sufficient to put themselves in "God's favor." But they are actually dreadfully mistaken. For true repentance involves something much more difficult than simply going through the proper outward motions. It involves taking to heart the full nature of one's own sinfulness.

The very fact that most people are sanguine about the state of their soul is (according to the English Calvinists) conclusive evidence of the superficiality of their own self-survey. For the soul of each of us is a "sea of corruption," and if someone doesn't see his own sin, that merely means he isn't looking hard enough. But how can we find all the sin within ourselves? How can we be sure that we have adequately condemned all the myriad things within ourselves for which condemnation is so justly warranted? It isn't easy. In fact, Perkins tells us, it's the "hardest thing in the world." And those who think it is easy – those who think they've managed to find all the sin within themselves without too much trouble – have undoubtedly failed to do so.

What one must do is search within one's soul for every single spot of sin. And one must find and claim it all – every grand evil and small infraction, as well as every sinful thought, even if it did not issue in an external act. One must

> search narrowly, as a man would do for a piece of gold or a precious jewel which is lost in a great house, or as a man may search for gold in a mine of the earth and but very little gold ore. Hence we may learn that in true repentance and conversion we must not search so only as only to find gross and palpable sins of our lives, but so as we may find those sins which the world accounts lesser sins and espy our secret faults and privy corruptions. Some corruptions seem more near akin to our nature and therein men hope to be excused when they forsake many other greater sins. But a true penitent sinner must search for such so as a good magistrate searcheth for a lurking traitor which is conveyed into some close and secret corner: and he must ransack his heart for such corruption as wherein his heart takes special delight and must think that no sin can be so small but it is too great to be spared and that every sin great or little must be searched for, as being all traitors to God's majesty. (Perkins 286–7)

Perkins is instructing us to view all our motives with suspicion, if not outright hostility. For he takes it as an undeniable given that sin lurks within our soul. And the sin within our soul is crafty. It uses camouflage and misdirection to trick us into thinking we have found it all when in fact some still remains concealed. But we must find it all, for he who "breaks but one of the commandments of God, though it be but once in all his lifetime, and that only in one thought, is subject to and in danger of eternal damnation thereby" (Perkins 157). Indeed, our good works themselves may be tools used by Satan to lull us into a false sense of security. Thus, since God "will find in the best works we do more matter of damnation than salvation," we "must rather condemn ourselves for our good works than look to be justified before God thereby" (Perkins 159).

So we must engage in constant self-examination, continually "ransacking" our heart. This obsessive internal scrutiny will never succeed in locating all the sin in our soul, let alone rooting it all out. But if we perform this self-inquisition with proper zeal, and if we are lucky, we may find within ourselves elements of God's grace (Perkins 159).

Now no one can ever merit salvation; Perkins is clear about that. Everyone's soul is a "sea of corruption." But God decided to bestow His grace on some people anyway. Why did God elect the people He did and damn the rest? It is impossible for us to know. God's reasons are not for us to understand. We do know, however, that whatever God decided, He decided before the moment of Creation. For we know that every event that ever takes place has been predetermined by God.

The religion of Cudworth's father thus consisted of two central notions: a Negative Answer that proclaimed that everyone is fundamentally evil, corrupt, and sinful, and a fatalism that proclaimed that everyone's eternal fate has been forever sealed. Coupled to those two notions was a vividly literal conception of hell and a never-ending exhortation to engage in obsessive fault-finding self-scrutiny. It must all have loomed over the heads of young children like the sword of Damocles.

2

Whichcote and Cudworth's Positive Answer

The elder Cudworth died in 1624, when Ralph was seven. His mother remarried to a man named John Stoughton, who was also a committed Calvinist. Dr. Stoughton took charge of young Ralph's education, and did so with "great care," making sure that by the time Ralph was thirteen "he was as well grounded in school learning as any boy of his age that went to University" (Birch viii). When he was fifteen, Cudworth was sent to Emmanuel College in Cambridge, where Stoughton himself had gone and was well connected.

This choice of college is significant. Emmanuel had been founded in 1584 by an early English Calvinist named Walter Mildmay with the express intention of preparing young men for the ministry. And by the time Cudworth arrived in 1632, the college had earned a reputation as the prime training ground for Calvinist preachers. Clearly, Stoughton's idea was to groom Cudworth to don the mantle that Perkins had worn and then passed to Cudworth's father. Ralph was a brilliant young man of impeccable background – just the person to carry forward the godly message of English Calvinism.

But it didn't happen. Although Cudworth remained politically and socially associated with the Calvinists for years to come, he quickly became one of the leading lights of a philosophical movement that was diametrically opposed to Calvinism's fundamental tenets. It was a movement based on a firm and abiding belief in the natural goodness of human beings – in an unabashedly Positive Answer to the Human Nature Question, one that would have had William Perkins and the elder Ralph Cudworth spinning in their graves. Describing the origins and shape of this Positive Answer is the goal of the present chapter.

A. "Govern Thyself from *Within*"

In addition to Cudworth, the anti-Calvinist movement at Cambridge included Henry More, who was three years older than Cudworth, and