CHAPTER I

Fellow-feeling and ethical theory:  
the British sentimentalists

If any enquire, “Whence arises this Love of Esteem, or Benevolence, to good Men, or to Mankind in general, if not from some nice Views of Self-Interest? Or, how we can be mov’d to desire the Happiness of others, without any View to our own?” It may be answer’d, “That the same Cause which determines us to pursue Happiness for our selves, determines us both to Esteem and Benevolence on their proper Occasions; even the very Frame of our Nature, or a generous Instinct, which shall be afterwards explain’d.”

Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry Concerning Moral Good and Evil*

THE SCHOOL OF SENTIMENT

It will swiftly become evident that this book of philosophy has a central hero – Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746). Hutcheson is an admirably clear writer, but I take my starting-point from the above uncharacteristically enigmatic (or perhaps just poorly written) passage. I would rewrite it somewhat as follows: Why do we approve and admire persons whose conduct displays genuine concern for others, if that concern in no way benefits us? (And why should we even care what happens to others in the first place?) The answer is that, just as we instinctively desire our own happiness, we are innately disposed not only to care about the good of others to some degree, but also to approve of such other-regarding concern whenever we see it at work. My own thesis is that Hutcheson’s answer is, on the whole and at the end of the day, true, and that there is just such a generous instinct in all of us. (And that this has wide-ranging implications for moral philosophy.) To make his claim plausible, Hutcheson appeals directly to observations of young children.

The Universality of this moral Sense, and that it is antecedent to Instruction, may appear from observing the Sentiments of Children, upon hearing the Storys with which they are commonly entertain’d as soon as they understand Language. They always passionately interest themselves on that side where Kindness and Humanity
are found; and detest the Cruel, the Covetous, the Selfish, or the Treacherous. How strongly do we see their Passions of Joy, Sorrow, Love, and Indignation, mov’d by these moral Representations, even tho there has been no pains taken to give them Ideas of a Deity, of Laws, of a future State, or of the more intricate Tendency of the universal Good to that of each Individual!

Many will dismiss this as romantic fantasy, sentimentality – but I take it to be scientific fact. Others, contemporary philosophers in particular, will have nothing to do with the idea of a moral sense, considering it to be an historical curio, a sort of philosophical white elephant. But I shall argue that there is a moral sense and explain as exactly as I can what it is.¹ And I will do this not by condensing articles from scientific journals – which could never suffice in any case – but rather by examining history, in this case the history of ethical speculation in the era of the sentimental school in early-modern British moral philosophy. I am specifically concerned with the thought of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, and to a somewhat lesser degree that of Hume and Smith – yet equally interested in the relationship of that school of philosophy to contemporary ethics. It was early-modern sentimentalism that first gave birth to and articulated the concept of moral sense, and I wish to explore that context in order to know better what role that idea could or should have in moral theory today.

My study has the form of an extended narrative (though the chronology is hardly linear), an attempt to retell the story of ethical sentimentalism in a new, more logical manner – a kind of pilgrimage, backward in time, to the origin of the sentimental school and thenceforth a return to ethics in the present day. I am by no means the first to characterize Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume and Smith as the leading proponents of a single school of ethics; Sir L. A. Selby-Bigge divided his classic anthology *British Moralists* (1897) into volumes under the headings, “the sentimental school” and “the intellectual school,” including in the first the same authors whom I propose to call the British sentimental moralists.² But there has never been a study of these thinkers altogether as sentimentalists, and no one (it appears to me) has explained the underlying logic of the sentimental school. How exactly were these particular philosophers sentimental moralists; what does it mean to say that they were? What unites them as proponents of a single tradition, a distinctive line of ethical speculation? What are the basic

¹ Moral sense theory, as I develop it, is (quite roughly) the view that fully disinterested moral approbation and disapprobation cannot be accounted for without recourse to several innate factors at work in ethical judgment having nothing as such to do with reason.

² With the exception that Hume was given his own separate volume; also, Selby-Bigge included Bishop Butler among the sentimentalists – which I do not, for reasons explained in chapter 4.
principles of sentimentalism as a type of ethical theory, and supposing we can state them meaningfully and interestingly, to what extent are they important and true? I begin with the quite modest claim, or rather assurance, that there indeed was a sentimental school in eighteenth-century England, Ireland and Scotland – loose-knit to be sure, but real and influential in its day. I then offer a rough and ready historical sketch of its career and try to express (intuitively and in a timeless sort of way) its main unifying principles.

Sentimentalism began in the days when assorted churchmen, aristocrats and pamphleteers felt called upon to combat – both theoretically and in the popular imagination – the infamous selfish theory of Thomas Hobbes, along with all of its evidently dangerous anti-moral implications. It was carried on through a rich debate among the anti-Hobbesian moralists themselves over whether the best defense of traditional morality lay in reason and metaphysics – the intellectual or rational camp – or instead in our innate sociability and fellow-sympathy – the sentimentalists. The latter view evolved in the hands of the Third Earl of Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson into what we now call “moral sense theory,” which was then roundly criticized by both rational moralists and at least one fresh sponsor of the selfish theory, Bernard Mandeville. Later on both David Hume and Adam Smith endeavored to distance themselves from the notion of such a peculiar moral sense (though not wholly successfully, on my reading). Finally sentimentalism advanced outward and onward, so to speak, in Hume’s endorsement of something very like a utilitarian standard for ethics and Smith’s theory of the impartial spectator.

I believe that at least one important strand in sentimental ethics first took shape in the work of the Cambridge Platonists, especially in the sermons of Benjamin Whichcote and the aphorisms of John Smith. But sentimentalism was first expounded as a recognizable school of ethics, at least halfway coherently, by Shaftesbury. Yet Shaftesbury would have been unable to do even that much had it not been for much previous solid intellectual work on the part of his own arch-nemesis, Hobbes. It was then developed into something more like a genuine ethical theory by Hutcheson, who, however, eventually partially abandoned its basic principles. Bishop Joseph Butler, despite his affinities (and debts) to Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, came very close to subverting the sentimental school by sowing serious doubts as to whether it could ever render a satisfactory explanation, or justification, for morality properly understood. Notwithstanding Butler’s acute criticisms of both Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, British sentimentalism was then perfected by Hume and Smith. But in the course of their refining
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and polishing these two conceded a bit too much to their own rivals, the intellectualists. In their hands sentimentalism lost much of its urgency, its electricity, as a distinctive and unprecedented school of ethics.

Thus the history of sentimentalism, on my telling of it, is fairly short and rather melancholic. It began in the second half of the seventeenth century and was past its best by the last quarter of the eighteenth, shortly before the time of Immanuel Kant. Then the school of sentiment was effectively laid to rest. This in stark contrast to its rival, the intellectual school, which remained alive and flourishes even (and especially) in the present day. Its enrollment dropped to zero; its original principles, such as they were, were consigned to histories of ethics, nevermore debated or defended within what soon would become professional academic philosophy.

But what were those principles? Sentimentalism, as it seems to me, weaves together three distinguishable strands of thought, with none obviously fundamental to either or both of the others. One is that people certainly do practice genuine altruism in their everyday dealings with one another, Hobbes notwithstanding, and when they do an essential factor in what is going on is a certain affective sensitivity on their parts to the good, the “weal and woe” of other persons, and a disposition to experience and act upon certain emotions and desires that aim, quite independently of abstract rational considerations of what is good or right as such, at those others’ welfare. Call this sort of moral affection “fellow-feeling” for short, and call the elaboration and defense of this general hypothesis sentimentalism’s motivational enterprise. A second, though closely related, line of thought might be called its justificational project. Sentimental moralists claim that in order to be fully successful, any justification for practicing altruism, living ethically, acting with regard to the interests of others, must appeal, ultimately, to human desires and emotions that are already other-regarding and benevolent in some sense on their own, prior to any abstract considerations concerning how one ought to live and act. Successful ethical justification, in other words, must appeal to our sympathies, our natural concern for others; reason, detached from affect, emotion, passion, can never supply a satisfactory answer to the question, why be moral? or establish a general requirement that we live ethically. Naturally much hangs on what counts as a successful justification in ethics, but the basic idea is roughly this: Any proposed rational justification of altruistic ethical principles and ways of life, if it is to succeed, must be capable of motivating those who accept it actually to act accordingly. Justifications that purport to bind us to such principles and ways of life without in any way depending for their force on our extra-rational feelings for others, our sentiments, are themselves
bound (for various reasons) to fail. A third strand in sentimentalist thought might be called axiological – an old-fashioned but perfectly suitable term. Sentimentalists believe that there is something especially, perhaps uniquely valuable in certain kinds of ethical motivations, namely those involving genuinely disinterested and distinctly emotional concern for others – sympathy, compassion, care, kindness – once again, fellow-feeling. Shaftesbury called this spontaneous concern natural affection, the Cambridge Platonists called it love, Hume named it a principle of humanity. I call it (later on and for purposes of my own) sentimental benevolence. This third aspect of sentimentalism is probably the hardest to spell out and certainly the most difficult to defend. Indeed the problem of imagining what an argument for ascribing special worthiness to those sorts of motives in preference to others, such as self-interest, conscientiousness or duty, is partly what drove Hutcheson to propose his moral sense theory in the first place, with all of the problems it in turn raised. This axiological strand of thought is undeniably there in the British sentimentalists, and I shall explain and support it as best I can (or perhaps explain exactly why it cannot properly speaking be defended at all).

Now it goes practically without saying that the vague notions of being motivated, justified or ennobled by moral sentiment or its twin, reason, that I have used in stating the rough idea of sentimentalism cannot be left standing as mere dummy predicates but require much clarification and defense as genuine concepts, or families of related concepts. After all, that is precisely what Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume and Smith (and their rational rivals) were up to for a good deal of their time on the philosophic scene – and this will be one main focus of my study.

It would be natural for the reader to expect right about here a statement of my historical methodology, the structures and relationships among the particular chapters and so on, and only then for the actual journey to commence; but I would like to reverse the procedure, so to speak, and start by presenting an argument of some kind for concerning ourselves with the British sentimentalists at all. The sentimental school had its day so why go back to it, why regard Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and the others as being of more than antiquarian interest? My answer is this: philosophers have always been obsessed with two questions: What is knowledge? And what is reality? In ethics, I believe that so much weight has been given to the knowledge question, the question of moral justification, that it has

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3 This is the strand that is particularly visible in Whichcote and John Smith and preserved in the work their sole defender, Shaftesbury, then later taken up by Shaftesbury’s own principal heir and systematizer, Hutcheson.
blinded a good many thoughtful people to an important dimension of moral reality, namely the role of affect (feelings, emotions, sentiments) in moral perception, judgment and motivation. Sentimentalism may show itself to be realistic in a way that its traditional rival, ethical rationalism, is not; therefore the work of its originators deserves careful and respectful re-examination. It might be better at this early stage (or at least safer) to say that sentimentalism is important because it includes an important dimension of moral reality, morality, morals, to which rationalism, almost by its very nature, remains blind or indifferent.

But I wish to leave all such “isms” out of things, or at least off to the side, for the present, and begin by sketching two very general conceptions of morality or of “the moral institution of life,” in Butler’s memorable phrase. The first seems to me to be at work, mostly by being taken for granted, in the vast majority of books and articles I read on the subject of what is nowadays called ethical theory. I will call it the “system of reasons” view of morality, of what is moral in human life and experience – and then contrast it with a quite different conception, calling that (naturally) the sentimental view.

**TWO CONCEPTIONS OF THE MORAL**

On the first view, morality forms, or simply is, a system. A system of what? I would say, a system of rules, principles or (more fashionably nowadays) norms, which govern – or are such that they ought to govern, even when they do not – people’s conduct towards others (their “manners and conversations one towards the other,” as Hobbes would say). These principles fall into two main categories, namely (speaking crudely) positive obligations or duties towards others – things one has to, or must, do – and negative constraints (things one must not). People should keep their word, tell the truth, assist helpless victims in need, care for their own children, and so on, and, on the other side, must not steal from, deceive, or otherwise cause gratuitous harm to others. For simplicity let’s call both obligations and constraints ‘moral demands.’ There are at least two leftover categories of moral things, on the reasons view. Morality is supposed to allow for options, or free choices: You may if so moved go way out of your way to help a stranger in need, or on the other side, may certainly go to a movie rather than spend that two hours working as hard as you can to improve everyone’s lot; moral demands are ordinarily overriding but not (so to speak) all-consuming. Finally, morality is thought to include a class of “duties to self” – to exercise a reasonable prudential regard to one’s own health and well being, to develop one’s natural aptitudes and talents, and so forth. These moral
demands are not to be identified with legal demands, though it seems very
natural (to philosophers writing from within this conception of the moral)
to speak of our being subject to or governed by requirements of both sorts.
The contrast, roughly, is that human beings create legal and penal systems
to govern their behavior from the outside, whereas they govern themselves
by moral principles (demands) in the field, as it were, without the need for
external sanctions – unless of course one stretches the meaning of sanctions
to include the moral disapprobation, censure or outrage of other moral
agents within the system.

Now I do not believe that these ideas are wholly artificial, purely
the creations of moral philosophers; I think that most ordinary (non-
philosophically inclined) people possess some notion of moral obligation,
of what is morally required, allowable, unacceptable, and so on. They think
and judge and act, in some sense and at least occasionally, in terms of moral
reasons. But once today's moral theorists step in they mostly tend immedi-
ately to clarify the idea of morality as a system of reasons (demands, options
and so on) in a rather predictable, almost automatic fashion. For example,
one question philosophers typically feel impelled (and qualified) to address
right away is this: what sort of thing is this system? (What is the ontological
status of moral demands, options, and so on? What sort of reality do they
enjoy, in what medium, so to speak, do they subsist?) Here I believe there
is a conventional, almost ritualized answer to be given. It is not simply
to claim that the question itself is illegitimate. Rather the answer to the
question, where is morality, is this: Morality is inherent in practical reason.
As rational agents we share a capacity not just to apprehend reasons for
believing what is true (what exists, what causes what) but also to discern
reasons for doing one thing rather than another. And the capacity to act for
(be motivated to act upon) those very reasons. Morality, it turns out, then,
is simply an expression (and in some sense the most important one) of
this very capacity for reasoning practically. It is not some diaphanous force
moving about in the world (or in us) but rather a certain manner in which
we come to the world as rational beings deliberating about and choosing
what to do in it. So the philosophers' short answer to the question, what is
morality a system of, is this: it is a system of practical reasons for action.

Some start by tidying things up, by asking (for example) whether the notions of moral options
and moral demands are 'co-relative' (maybe free choice is just the realm of action where duties leave off),
or whether prudential concern is ultimately justifiable on utilitarian grounds (as enhancing our ability
to discharge our duties to others).

Feelings (emotions, sentiments) get themselves mentioned occasionally, but then the main issue
straightaway becomes when and why it makes sense – i.e. is rational – to have them. (See my note
on philosophical 'isms', below (n. 48).)
This is how a good many moral philosophers today tend to talk, and the manner in which they practice ethics, moral philosophy, reflects this way of conceiving and speaking of the moral in a way that almost suggests a kind of predestination. If morality is a system of reasons for acting, we obviously need a theory of reasons, and of what it is to reason practically about what to do. So the first step is to propose and defend a theory of practical reason and of its relation to intention and action. Move next to the question, what in general is a good reason for acting. Finally demonstrate as best you can that moral reasons for acting are very good reasons for acting indeed. As practical agents we all have powerful, even overriding reasons to act morally, to act in accordance with moral demands. To do less would be (in one fashion or another) to betray our own nature as practically rational beings, to fail to live and act fully rationally. Hence morality is rationally demanded of everyone. Accordingly it is the job of every moral theorist to prove this (and then, or along the way, to work out in precise detail what those demands actually are). The whole spirit of this approach to ethics is perhaps best captured by Stephen L. Darwall when he writes (in *Impartial Reason*, 1983), “One moralist after another has sought to demonstrate that it is contrary to reason to flout ethics. And although no particular attempt has been found compelling, indeed not even by a consensus of the moralists themselves, they continue to assert what they feel in their bones: that it must be so.”

There is one other important feature of the reasons conception of morality (and of ethics) that must be mentioned right away, and that is its general idea of moral motivation. Morality, whatever it is, is agreed by virtually everyone to be more than merely notional (like the square root of negative one, or the set of all sets); it is believed to have real effects in the shared world, to “produce or prevent actions,” as Hume famously put it. So even if it is contrary to reason (in some very abstract or theoretical way) to flout moral demands, what is it that can actually move people to pay heed to them, to conform to them in what they do – that is, to act

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6 To put this in another way: philosophers deal in arguments, and they propound and challenge arguments by giving reasons. Arguing (coolly) is simply giving reasons. But ethics, it is almost universally agreed, concerns questions about what to do, how to live. Questions of how to live and act are questions about what sort of life makes most sense – i.e. is most reasonable – to live, are they not? *Ergo* we need a theory of reasons for acting (especially good ones), do we not? Since these good reasons invariably turn out to include (a system of) reasons to be moral, then to be indifferent to moral norms, reasons, demands or what have you is *ipso facto* to live irrationally, to act for bad reasons or none at all. (And the usually unspoken moral of it all is that the more sensible you are about things the better you must be, as a moral agent.) Case closed. In short, since the central business of philosophy just is rational justification, the subject matter of ethics simply must be moral reasons – and only moral reasons.

7 p. 13.
practically reasonably? Accounts vary, but here too I think there is something like a near-universal consensus on the subject. Moral demands motivate or restrain us in acting because as practically rational beings we humans possess a capacity for moral autonomy or (as it has recently become more fashionable to say) normative self-governance (or self-government). And here I think it is critically important to allow a distinguished upholder of the reasons conception of ethics to speak for herself; I have selected the following eloquent passage from Christine M. Korsgaard’s commentary on the work of Frans de Waal, in *Primates and Philosophers* (2006).

The animal’s purposes are given to him by his affective states: his emotions and his instinctual or learned desires. . . . The end that the animal pursues is determined for him by his desires and emotions . . . Kantians are among the philosophers who believe that a deeper level of assessment and therefore choice is possible. Besides asking yourself how to get what you want most, you can ask yourself whether your wanting this end is a good reason for taking this particular action. The question is not merely about whether the act is an effective way to achieve your end, but whether, even given that it is, your wanting this end *justifies* you in taking this action . . . Even if you do judge the action to be justified and act, you are acting not merely from your desire but from your judgment that the action is justified.

Why do I say this represents a deeper level of intentionality? In the first place, an agent who is capable of this form of assessment is capable of rejecting an action along with its purpose, not because there is something else she wants (or fears) even more, but simply because she judges that doing that sort of act for that purpose is wrong. In a famous passage in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argued that we are capable of setting aside even our most urgent natural desires . . . to avoid performing a wrong action . . . Now if we are capable of setting aside our purposes when we cannot pursue them by any decent means, then there is also a sense in which when we *do* decide to pursue a purpose, we can be seen as having *adopted* that purpose. Our purposes may be suggested to us by our desires and emotions, but they are not determined for us by our affective states . . . Since we choose not only the means to our ends but also the ends themselves, this is intentionality at a deeper level . . . Another way to put the point is to say that we do not merely *have* intentions, good or bad. We assess and adopt them. We have the capacity for normative self-government, or, as Kant called it, “autonomy.” It is at this level that morality emerges. The morality of your action is not a function of the content of your intentions. It is a function of the exercise of normative self-government.8


Obviously Korsgaard touches on several core issues of contemporary philosophy, here, but the immediate point is this: How, on the reasons conception of morality, do moral reasons, moral demands, shape people’s actual conduct, their manners and conversations? The answer is that people adopt them for their own actions; they judge that they ought to act on them, and then act on those judgments. When men and women properly use their capacity to judge and act in this fashion, there is the essence of morality, the moral.

So that is one concept of morality and (in bare outline) one conception of what ethics, moral theory, is supposed to be about, which seems to ‘fit’ it remarkably perfectly. But (even as Korsgaard’s last sentence suggests) this view of the moral is not the only one to have been proposed and that is also true of the approach to ethics that goes with it. There are other ways of conceiving morality and what philosophers are supposed to say and do about it.¹⁰

In “The Fourteenth Ward” (chapter 1 of *Black Spring*, 1959), Henry Miller imparts a charming depiction of his own boyhood, coming into his own on the streets surrounding the old Navy Yard in Williamsburg, Brooklyn at the approach of the first World War. But his narrative centers about what I take to be a genuinely philosophical claim, which seems to haunt me whenever I sit down to study or to ‘do’ ethics.

To be born in the street means to wander all your life, to be free. It means accident and incident, drama, movement. It means above all dream. A harmony of irrelevant facts which gives to your wandering a metaphysical certitude. In the street you learn what human beings really are; otherwise, or afterwards, you invent them. What is not in the open street is false, derived, that is to say, *literature*. The boys you worshipped when you first came down into the street remain with you all your life. They are the real heroes. Napoleon, Lenin, Capone – all fiction. Napoleon is nothing to me in comparison with Eddie Carney, who gave me my first black eye. No man I have ever met seems as princely, as regal, as noble, as Lester Reardon, who, by the mere act of walking down the street, inspired fear and admiration. Jules Verne never led me to the places that Stanley Borowski had up his sleeve when it came dark. Robinson Crusoe lacked imagination in comparison with Johnny Paul. All these boys of the Fourteenth Ward have a flavor about them

¹⁰ I happen to agree with Lawrence A. Blum that it is highly unlikely “that all the deliverances of the ordinary moral consciousness, even our most deeply held ones, are entirely compatible with one another and can be brought together within a common system [my emphasis].” (*Friendship, Altruism and Morality*, p. 8.)

This is connected with the fact that the concept “moral” itself cannot rightly be given a unitary meaning, but rather bears the heritage of different moral traditions from which it gathers different sorts of meanings . . . the assumption of unity seems to me an article of faith, not borne out by experience.