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Introduction

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Hutcheson's life and work

Francis Hutcheson inspired David Hume, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, and many other eminent moral philosophers. Their fame eventually overshadowed his, and he is now comparatively little known.

Hutcheson's grandfather had, like so many other Scottish Presbyterians, settled in Ulster, where he served as a minister. His son John Hutcheson (d. 1729), the father of Francis, followed him in the same calling. Francis Hutcheson was born in Armagh on 8 August 1694.

His studies began a local school, where he acquired a sound grasp of classical languages, and were continued in a `dissenting academy', one of the schools at more advanced levels which had been set up primarily for the education of students who for religious reasons were unable or unwilling to attend the educational institutions of the Church of England; the universities of Oxford and Cambridge and Trinity College in Dublin being foremost among these. At the age of sixteen Hutcheson moved to the University of Glasgow where, after a year of study, followed by a year's break, he undertook theological studies for for another four years. Having successfully concluded these studies he returned to Ireland, and was made a probationary minister. Not long after, he accepted an invitation to set up an academy in Dublin.

The new venture was a success: Hutcheson even had to find an assistant teacher to help out. During his time in Dublin he also became associated with the circle around Robert, Viscount Molesworth (1656–1725). Molesworth had been on friendly terms with the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713) and there can be little doubt that it was through him that Hutcheson took notice of and became influenced by Shaftesbury's philosophy.[1] Molesworth also

[1] Robbins, `When it is that colonies may turn independent' in Caroline Robbins, *Absolute Liberty* (ed. B.Taft), Hamden, Conn.: Archon 1982, p. 155: Molesworth's

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encouraged Hutcheson to publish, and it is probable that he may have helped to have the *Reflections* published in *The London Journal*. It was here that Hutcheson also became friendly with Edward Synge (d. 1762), who later became a bishop in the Church of Ireland, that is, the established Anglican Church. They were both thanked by Hutcheson in the Preface to the *Inquiry*. Also associated with this circle was Hutcheson's close friend James Arbuckle, to whose writings some further reference will be made in the following account.

By the time Hutcheson left Glasgow he was well regarded for his academic ability, and his publications from 1725 soon established his reputation. When the professor of moral philosophy, Gerschom Carmichael, died in 1729, Hutcheson accepted an invitation from the university to fill the vacant chair, which he took up in the autumn of 1730. It was then that he delivered the inaugural lecture included in this volume.

Hutcheson spent the rest of his life in Glasgow, with occasional visits to Ireland. He was very popular with students and colleagues, indeed with most people, except the orthodox, who disapproved of his liberal theological tendencies. On one occasion, in 1738, there was even a prosecution (unsuccessful) before the Glasgow Presbytery for alleged deviations from the Westminster Confession, a document ratified in 1647, to which all ministers of the Church of Scotland were obliged to subscribe.

He was very well liked as a teacher; in Glasgow, he pioneered lecturing in English.[2] His regular classes, and those open to the general public, were consistently well attended. One popular series of lectures, mentioned by William Leechman, whose memoir is the main primary source of biographical information, was given on Sunday evenings and dealt with Grotius's *De veritate religionis Christianae* (On the truth of the Christian religion).[3] He complained that teaching duties and other academic matters did not give him the uninterrupted time he needed to write an improved treatise on

influence was a catalytic agent conveying English influence to Hutcheson. The contact with *The London Journal* is discussed in Appendix 16, p. 159.

2 This is described as a new departure, at p. 64 in William Robert Scott, *Francis Hutcheson. His Life, Teaching and Position in the History of Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1900. Reprint: New York: Kelley 1966. According to Robbins *Absolute Liberty*, p. 154, Carmichael had occasionally done likewise.

3 See William Leechman's preface to Hutcheson's *System of Moral Philosophy*. See also p. 9 .

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moral philosophy. He did, however, finish the manuscript to his *System* in 1737 (posthumously published by his son in 1755, with a dedication to Synge), and published a compend on moral philosophy, and one on metaphysics. A sudden illness struck him down on his birthday in 1746.[4]

Among Hutcheson's students, the one who rose to greatest eminence was Adam Smith (1723–90), the author of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), who also later held the Glasgow chair in moral philosophy.

In histories of philosophy, Hutcheson is regularly mentioned together with Shaftesbury as a representative of the theory of a moral sense. Many aspects of that theory are still topical and currently the subject of a keen philosophical debate: for instance, the question of the ontological status of moral qualities, and the question of similarity or difference between such qualities and the secondary qualities, such as colours, for instance.

As a critic of egoistic theories of motivation Hutcheson preceded Joseph Butler (1692-1752) and David Hume (1711–76), and deserves an equal place with them in this part of the history of thought. As a critic of rationalist theories of ethics he anticipated Hume. Hume's writings on moral philosophy frequently echo Hutcheson's arguments and even his turns of phrase.

Political writers took note of Hutcheson's statements on matters of political morality, to be found mainly in his *System*, and cited him frequently. Anthony Benezet (1713–84) did so in his argument against slavery. Activists in the cause of American independence, like Francis Alison (1705–1779), professor in Philadelphia, who used his compend as a textbook, were influenced by him. And – as persuasively argued by Garry Wills in his *Inventing America* – when Thomas Jefferson drafted the American Declaration of Independence, Hutcheson may have been his chief source of inspiration.[5]

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[4] The information above is chiefly derived from Scott, whose biography, published almost a century ago, has not yet been superseded. For details about Hutcheson's publications, see the bibliography.

[5] On Alison, see David F. Norton, 'Francis Hutcheson in America', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 154 (1976) 1547-68. There are far-reaching similarities. Wills's claim that there was a direct and distinctive influence has, however, been hotly disputed. See e.g. Gordon S. Wood, 'Heroics', *New York*

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When dealing with ideas and their history, different levels of opinion can be distinguished. We can for many periods and societies identify something that can be styled a climate of opinion, a prevailing or at least very influential political or religious ideology; it enters into the mentality of a society, into the spirit of the times. This is particularly significant in the case of Hutcheson, for it was at this level that Hutcheson desired to bring about important changes in moral beliefs and attitudes.

At another level, however, there are the theories proposed by the learned in ancient and modern times, theories which are beyond the immediate concern or grasp of a wider public. At this level are to be found, for instance, theories of moral ontology, concerning questions of what kind of reality can be ascribed to moral qualities and relations, and theories of moral epistemology which try to determine whether moral truths can be known, and if so, how.

Hutcheson's theory of a moral sense, for which he is best known, belongs to this second level. That theory is not, however, elaborated in our two present texts, nor does either of them have much to offer on the closely related topic, under debate recently, of whether or not he should be interpreted as a moral realist.[6] The texts here presented deal with ethical matters and questions of moral psychology which are much closer to the more popular level of moral thought. The moral sense is mentioned neither in the *Reflections*[7] nor in the *Lecture*.

This is why Hutcheson's moral epistemology and ontology will receive only marginal attention in the following introduction.[8] The comments on his ideas will be confined mainly to the topics

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Review of Books 28, no. 5 (1981) p. 16. There is a very useful list of contributions to this debate on p. xiii in Leidhold's translation of *T2* and in his notes.

6 \`Realism' is the term currently in vogue. Near-synonyms are \`objectivism', \`cognitivism', and \`factualism'. The term \`realism' was actually used at the time, though not in exactly the same sense. For Shaftesbury, \`realism, in respect of virtue' is the opposite to moral positivism, i.e. to the view that morality has its basis in an act of (divine) legislation (*The Moralists* II, 3, in *Characteristics*, vol. II, pp. 52ff.).

7 Noted by Wolfgang Leidhold, who actually argues in his *Ethik und Politik bei Francis Hutcheson*, Munich: Alber 1985, p. 21, that the moral sense is not a central theme in Hutcheson's thought.

8 There is a very useful list of recent discussions of these topics in J. Schneewind (ed.), *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990, p. 524.

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discussed in these two texts. Although prepared for different purposes and occasions, they have a common message: a decisive rejection of important doctrines which present human nature as selfish and corrupt, and a strong affirmation of the contrary, positive view.

The present first section of the introduction will be followed by an account of the contemporary intellectual scene which formed a setting for Hutcheson's thought, as it comes to expression in the two texts, except for some matters specific to the *Lecture* which are dealt with in the editorial overview of that text. The next section presents his own position, while the last two sections review some contemporary reactions to his ideas and discuss the present-day relevance of some aspects of this eighteenth-century debate.

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The intellectual environment

The rejection of the view that all our actions are ultimately self-interested was perhaps what mattered most to Hutcheson. His position can be better understood once we understand why it could be so significant. To this end, a view of the intellectual landscape in which he was situated will help. First to be considered are the religious and moral notions that were inculcated in most people early in life.

Man's natural corruption

When considering the way people are and the things they do – human characters and actions – some will seem to us indifferent: neither good nor bad. But as for the rest, we inevitably divide them. We approve of some, disapprove of some; some are admired, some despised.

There have been times and places when this apparently natural way of thinking has met powerful opposition. The division into good and bad is rejected. In its place comes a different doctrine, one which denies that any human character or action can be good. Human nature is essentially flawed. The basic contrast is no longer that between the good and the bad. The only distinction that can have any application in real life is that between two ways in which the bad appears. The bad may appear in disguise, masquerading as something good; or it may appear undisguised.

This view seems at first sight to be strongly supported by the facts. The difference, it has been said, between an optimist and a pessimist is simply that the pessimist is better informed.

On reflection, it is, however, not so easy to formulate this pessimistic doctrine in a coherent way. In order to make good sense it needs an implicit contrast with a possible alternative. One cannot seriously deplore the absence of the good unless its existence is at

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least conceivable.

Some moralists and satirists who adopted this outlook, to be further discussed below on pp. 14ff., concede this when they allow that genuinely good actions or characters *are*, after all, possible – though extremely rare. In mitigation, let us say that they compensate with their wit for their lack of consistency.

Theologians and pessimistic metaphysicians are a little more consistent.[1] They do not allow any of it even at the outer boundary of the natural and human world, that is, in the realm of very high improbability, but relegate it to a supernatural or metaphysical realm. Yet a critic could complain that the difficulty remains unresolved: the difference is only that the genuinely good is no longer said to be extremely rare but rather extremely remote.[2]

Some of these writers also tried to argue for this pessimistic view by turning the theory that all motivation is selfish into a conceptual truth.[3] The consequence of that move is, however, rather awkward: unselfish motivation can no longer be regarded as highly desirable, albeit improbable or miraculous. It becomes altogether impossible. The theory now suffers from a serious tension: the contrast between selfish and unselfish is both implied and denied.

Leaving aside the difficulties there may be in giving this pessimistic or indeed misanthropic outlook a coherent formulation, there can be no doubt that views of this kind have exercised a powerful influence in past and present times. They were very important in the moral and religious thought in Hutcheson's time.

Man's natural corruption: theologians

The doctrine of man's natural corruption is central to many strands of Christian thought, but was given particular emphasis by Luther and Calvin. An authoritative formulation of a strand of Calvinist theology was given by the Synod of Dort (Dordrecht) 1619, when it condemned, in five points, the less forbidding Arminian doctrine.[4]

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1 Pessimistic metaphysicians: e.g. Schopenhauer and Eduard von Hartmann.

2 This is a central part of Ludwig Feuerbach's analysis in *Das Wesen des Christentums* [The essence of Christianity] 1st edn 1841: in religious thought, all positive human qualities are taken away from man and instead ascribed to a being who does not belong to the human and natural world.

3 See p. 72.

4 Arminius's five condemned articles and the Canons of the Synod are in P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. III, New York: Harper 1877, pp. 545ff.

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Incidentally, it was not only the doctrine that was condemned. The same fate also befell the leadership of the Arminian party: one of them, Grotius, spent some years imprisoned in the Loewestein castle.[5] The five points were:

(1) The nature of man, owing to Adam's fall, is totally depraved. Nothing good can come from him without God's gracious intervention. (2) God decided *before* creating the world which people would receive salvation. (This is the doctrine commonly known as supralapsarianism. The number of persons saved might be very small. These are God's elect.) (3) Christ's sacrifice on the cross redeemed the elect only. (4) God's grace is irresistible, so that salvation is independent of any decision by the person elect. (5) Those destined for salvation cannot forfeit it.

This rather rigorous version of Calvinist theology was the one prevailing in the Church of Scotland. It had been set down in the Westminster Confession of 1647, which served as the Kirk's doctrinal standard.

Leechman's statement, mentioned above on p. 4, that Hutcheson lectured on Grotius's defence of the Christian religion, would at first sight suggest to us merely that Hutcheson wished to promote Christian knowledge. But we can now see that more is implied. These Sunday lectures dealt with a book whose author had been a leading opponent of the theology of the orthodox-conservative Evangelical party in the Church of Scotland. There is a clear hint that Hutcheson's sympathies lay with those whose theological sentiments were more liberal, and who were soon to become known as the Moderate party. This was indeed the case.

The moderate reaction against Calvinist theology had started earlier in England with theologians often described as latitudinarians, a term which at the time was mostly used disparagingly by their opponents. Among these moderates were Edward Stillingfleet (1635–99), John Tillotson (1630-94), and other churchmen, including Cambridge Platonists like Benjamin Whichcote (1609–83), Henry More (1614–87), and Ralph Cudworth (1617–88). Important to them was the view that good and evil are not measured by God's will but

[5] Hugo Grotius (1583–1645). He escaped, with the courageous assistance of his wife, hidden in a trunk supposedly containing books only. He then made his way to Paris, where he wrote *De jure belli ac pacis* (On the law of war and peace), 1st edn 1625, the work that has established his reputation as the father of international law. See also p. 51.

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are so essentally and unalterably'[6]

They shared a distaste for the puritan doctrine of salvation and its implications, a doctrine involving justification by faith alone, imputed righteousness, and absolute predestination. Similar views slowly gained acceptance among the Scottish and Irish Presbyterians, and Hutcheson became their most significant early advocate.

To return to our theme: man's natural corruption. The Westminster Confession (16, 7) asserts:

> Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith, nor are done in a right manner according to the Word, nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful and can not please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God. And yet their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God.[7]

Article 13 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, which define the theological doctrine of that church, declares similarly:

> Works done before the grace of Christ, and the inspiration of His Spirit, are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesu Christ, neither do they make men meet to receive grace, or (as the school authors say) deserve grace of congruity: yea, rather, for that they are not done as God hath willed and commanded them to be done, we doubt not but that they have the nature of sin.[8]

Why is it that good works, like helping victims of misfortune, even at great personal cost, do not please God? If we were to accept strictly the passages just quoted, we would, for instance, find nothing in the story of the good Samaritan that would suggest that his action was pleasing to God; rather, it would have to be regarded as sinful.[9]

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[6] Here, use has been made of the account in J. Spurr, '"Latitudinarianism" and the Restoration Church', *Historical Journal* 31 (1988) 61–82.

[7] The whole document is in Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, pp. 600ff.

[8] E. Gibson, *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, London: Methuen 1897, p. 415.

[9] The parable in the gospel, Luke 10:29–37, does not seem to convey this message,

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