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978-0-521-88871-4 - Fellow-Feeling and the Moral Life
Joseph Duke Filonowicz
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FELLOW-FEELING AND THE MORAL LIFE

How do our feelings for others shape our attitudes and conduct towards them? Is morality primarily a matter of rational choice, or instinctual feeling? Joseph Duke Filonowicz takes the reader on an engaging, informative tour of some of the main issues in philosophical ethics, explaining and defending the ideas of the early-modern British sentimentalists. These philosophers – Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith – argued that it is our feelings, and not our “reason,” which ultimately determine how we judge what is good or bad, right or wrong, and how we choose to act towards our fellow human beings. Filonowicz draws on contemporary sociology and evolutionary biology as well as present-day moral theory to examine and defend the sentimentalist view and to challenge the rationalistic character of contemporary ethics. His book will appeal to readers interested in both history of philosophy and current ethical debates.

JOSEPH DUKE FILONOWICZ is Professor of Philosophy at Long Island University, Brooklyn Campus.

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*For Joe and Marty, Janny and George,
Martha, Marta, Joseph, and Nicholas*

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Preface

This book originated, in a strange way, at a particular moment in the late 1970s when a very practical, unphilosophical question was posed to me by someone whom I admired (and still do) very, very much. As I fumbled about for a dissertation topic (while studying at Columbia University in New York City) my professor and adviser Mary Mothersill asked, “Why not do something in the history of ethics?” I must have had grand delusions of solving the riddle of consciousness (or something) and she must have sensed, not that I might turn out to have some natural talent for writing about the history of moral philosophy but rather that the general subject might be relatively “easy” enough for me, given my slow-to-develop philosophical comprehension. Almost right away I discovered D. D. Raphael’s two volume *British Moralists 1650–1800* on the shelves of the seventh floor lounge of Philosophy Hall, and that, as they say, was that. Hobbes, Butler, Mandeville, Hutcheson – *they* were talking about real people, about questions people actually ask themselves concerning how to live, about real life, about you and me. I went on to write the dissertation about Shaftesbury and his rather curious notion of a natural affection and equally exceptional idea that the natural affections are somehow or other “the springs and sources of all actions truly good.” And now, so many years later, that essentially is what the present book is still about (though none of it is recycled, I assure you).

This is a handcrafted, very homespun piece of work (even the index). I do not have a long list of “big name” associates to credit, from discussions with whom I have profited. In fact there are only two well-known philosophers who, at a much earlier stage, were kind enough to take a look at what I was doing and criticize it (rather sharply, I might add): J. B. Schneewind (whom I met only once) and (naturally) Mary Mothersill. And I do credit and thank them officially here. Especially Mary. She probably disagrees with 90 per cent of what I say about ethics but that never mattered one bit – at least to her.

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I do have a somewhat longer list of people to thank here at my home university over the past twenty-one years, which we call simply “LIU.” I think of them as my circle of encouragement: Robert Spector, Gerald Silveira, Bernice Braid and Terence Malley (English), Elinor West, Margaret Cuonzo and Amy Robinson (philosophy), Cynthia Maris Dantzie (art), John Ehrenberg (political science), Joram Warmund (history), David Cohen (my college Dean), and David Steinberg (our university’s President). Naturally, I will always remain grateful to my dissertation advisors back at Columbia: Richard Kuhns, Charles Larmore, Sidney Morgenbesser and (again, of course) Mary Mothersill.

I have never met sociologist James Q. Wilson, whose arguments in *The Moral Sense* take the lead in my seventh and final chapter. But when that book came out in 1993 I (rather brassily) wrote to him to express my admiration and impose on him my first paper on the sentimentalists. He graciously wrote back to me from his office at UCLA saying that he had “found my essay criticizing rationalism to be quite good, and to reflect [his] own views.” That certainly was encouraging. I hope that he will be pleased by the present work, which is in part a tribute to his own keen eye for the intricacies of family life and the awkward yet inexorable moral development of every young child. (A modern-day Hutcheson, to my mind.)

The work of Thomas Nagel (who is not known to me personally) has been a continuing influence and source of enrichment, even when used, as here, as something of a foil for the sentimentalists rather than engaged with on its own terms.

I consider Frederick Seymour Michael practically as co-author of chapter 5, composed throughout the summer of 2006. Each week I would ride two buses to get to Brooklyn College, his home institution, where we would sit on assorted benches and stairways arguing about what Hutcheson was saying about moral sense and debating such eminently impractical subjects as how various thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment understood the workings of representative concomitant ideas, how Satan’s moral sense might have come to be so corrupted, whether cats subject to physical abuse by young boys might resent rather than merely dislike their ill-treatment, and so on. So I was very happy when, in early September, Fred finally approved the chapter, for I felt that we must have produced something solid and broadly accurate concerning Hutcheson’s ideas, having discussed them so carefully. So if we did, he gets half the credit, and half the blame (except for the actual writing) if we did not. I also thank Emily Michael, a scholar of Hutcheson’s aesthetics as well as distinguished chairperson of the philosophy department there, for her own encouragement

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as well as for allowing me to borrow her husband for a good part of that summer.

Of course I am especially indebted to Hilary Gaskin, senior commissioning editor for philosophy, and the readers, at Cambridge University Press. Such perceptiveness, such forthright honesty, such awe-inspiring professionalism – I have never worked so hard or learned so much, so fast, in my life. I am also grateful to the present editors of *History of Philosophy Quarterly* and *Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints* for their permission to use materials that originally appeared in those publications (in 1989 and 1991) in chapters 2 and 3, respectively, of this book.

Finally, rather than merely thank my parents, my siblings, my beautiful wife Martha and the three extraordinary children we share, I have dedicated this book to all of them.

Although my project is aimed primarily at scholars of ethics and its history and historians of ideas generally (whom I hope to provoke or at least challenge in sundry ways) I believe I have succeeded – with all of these people's help – in writing in language that is accessible to scholars of eighteenth-century ideas and culture, students of philosophy and history, and non-philosophers and interested laypersons (non-academics) – in other words, members of the general reading public. I have avoided needless “isms,” charts, technical vocabulary, quantifiers, peculiar modal-logical operators and so on, and have tried to write in plain, clear language for the benefit of any interested intelligent reader. That is after all what the British Moralists did; their questions about people, their motives, their ethical possibilities, came to them naturally and still concern everybody. To try to understand and decide the merits of their competing answers is intrinsically rewarding for any thoughtful person. If I have made that activity a bit more accessible and attractive for a few more people, and little else, then – to borrow the title of one of Bach's recitatives, from the Little Notebook for Anna Magdalena – “It is enough” (*Ich habe genug*).