



Isabel Rivers, Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England 1660–1780, Volume II: Shaftesbury to Hume

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ISABEL RIVERS. *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England 1660–1780. Volume II, Shaftesbury to Hume*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. xiv + 386. ISBN 0-521-38341-2, cloth, £50/\$75.

This two-volume masterpiece mirrors its title. The prose is lyrical and lucid, the discussions evince intellectual integrity and rigor, and the author's voice allows readers to successfully navigate the philosophical, religious, and literary waters of formal academic and religious institutions of middle to late seventeenth- and most of eighteenth-century Britain. Both volumes are chronologically arranged, revealing the actual participants' inquiries and debates rather than placing them into particular schools or movements. Rivers's purpose for this structuring is much like D. D. Raphael's, expressed in *British Moralists, 1650-1800*, "[to show] how the thought of the British Moralists developed and was modified by their criticism."¹ While the second volume alone—Shaftesbury to Hume—is the subject of this review, some discussions may be applicable to both, particularly given the overall general influence of religious beliefs upon theological and philosophical ethics documented in this study.

Specifically, Rivers traces the critical modern evolution of British ethical thought. This very evolution was set into motion by conceptual shifts (if not revolutions) in Anglican religious and intellectual thinking about questions concerning the connection between God, human nature, reason, free will, the nature of divine grace and what constitutes a truly good life. These shifts were inspired by a particular group of Anglican thinkers, latitudinarians or the "latitude men," and their varying commitments to theological truths, to particular liturgical practices, and to formal religious structures. The intellectual predecessors of enlightenment "freethinking," the latitudinarians refocused Anglicanism as the "religion of reason" and their positions ranged from working within a religious framework in order to reconcile religious doctrine and belief with ethics to jettisoning ethics from any kind of religious framework. One of their central concerns was whether morality can be located within human nature itself or whether the source of moral goodness is in God alone. Rivers's analyses utilize most if not all of the writings of those British Moralists that are included in Raphael's *British Moralists*. Three works are very thoroughly engaged: Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks* and Hume's *Enquiries* and *Treatise*.

Discussions in volume 1 are generally restricted to an exploration of English supporters of and dissenters to the Church of England. Rivers's investigation covers only the British Isles and does not include "prolonged attention to Roman Catholics, non-jurors, high-church Anglicans, or Quakers" (1:2). In volume 2,

Rivers focuses on the further development of their ideas, particularly Shaftesbury's; she paints a picture of a place and a time more accurately understood as "Shaftesburian," extending from England to Ireland and Scotland.

Rivers frames her discussions in terms of five fundamental questions that dominated seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British debates about the connection between religion and ethics (2: 1). These are:

1. Is there a viable religion of nature separate from revealed religion?
2. Is the foundation of morals to be sought in human nature, or beyond it, in reason, the affections, the moral sense, sentiment, the will of God, the Nature of things, or some combination of these?
3. If the constitution of human nature is the starting point for moral enquiry, does it necessarily lead to God, or is this an irrational leap?
4. Is the separation of ethics from religion advantageous or damaging to the latter?
5. Is an atheist morality possible?

Rivers begins her investigations in the second volume with a lively discussion of the difficulty associated with the labels of freethinking, deism, and atheism, one similar in kind to challenges posed by the term "latitudinarian." Part of the problem rests with ascertaining the true reasons various thinkers held such positions and the rationale for ascribing these labels (particularly freethinking versus deism); for example, there are three possible tempers which may be associated with freethinkers. One is "a general anti-Christian stance" (8). The second is "epistemological and methodological," resting on the role of reason in determining "whether religious language has any meaning, whether anything intelligible can be said about God, and whether the traditional requirement of belief in things above but not contrary reason is feasible" (8). The third concerns the problem associated with the use of the term "natural religion" and a preference for natural religion over "revealed." One difficulty is that individuals may maintain a strong belief in God, yet reject the institutional structures of formal organized religion and this position is inadequately distinguished from the stronger position of those who fail to find anything intelligible about an unknowable God.

The above discussion prepares readers to understand a very important project in volume 2; that is, the demonstration of how and why Shaftesbury's moral thought profoundly influenced the course of British ethics. The discussion allows for a better understanding of Shaftesbury's critics, including Clarke, Berkeley, and Butler and also explains the preference for Butler over Locke in Cambridge in the nineteenth century. Specifically, Rivers believes that the continuing influence of Shaftesbury rests on his commitment to the study of a moral system based on human nature and the workings of natural affection and "a self-conscious faculty

of reason or reflection" (154). For this claim, Rivers provides some examples of indirect as well as direct influence and acknowledgment of such influence. One is John Balguy's "restatement of the rationalist position and a new analysis of reason, conscience, and rectitude" in response to the evolution of Shaftesbury's reflections on "natural affection, instinct, benevolence and the moral sense" found in the work of Francis Hutcheson (154). A second is the debate between Butler and Hutcheson about the workings of reason and affection, stimulated by the work of Shaftesbury, resulting in Hutcheson's "modification" of his own views on the workings of reason and the affections. The explicit acknowledgement by Richard Price of his debt to Shaftesbury is offered as an example of Shaftesbury's ongoing influence on succeeding generations of British philosophers: "A generation later, Richard Price, a declared admirer of Butler and opponent of Hutcheson, in the course of his defence of reason and attack on instinct claimed Shaftesbury as a forebear" (154).

With a careful discussion of the trajectory of the ethical thought of latitudinarians and freethinkers behind them, readers are well prepared for Rivers' chapter on Hume, in particular the discussion of his position on the independence of an ethics of sentiment from any religious or theological basis. Rivers believes that Hume's choice to reveal publicly his religious skepticism influenced both critical supporters such as Kames and Smith and unfriendly critics such as Paley. Initially, Kames was a staunch supporter of Hume. He distanced himself intellectually and personally from Hume initially because of Hume's arguments against miracles, as evidenced in personal correspondence between them. The estrangement was exacerbated by the publication of Hume's *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* (later entitled *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*). Another potent source of disagreement between Kames and Hume was over Hume's views on the nature of justice and the role of utility. While Adam Smith also disagreed with these same views, he maintained cordial personal and professional relations with Hume. Rivers demonstrates how Smith accepts and develops Hume's view that sympathy is the source of moral sentiment yet ultimately rejects Hume's account of the specific character of virtue and the source of moral approval.

Two additional features of the second volume are noteworthy and will be well appreciated by those who find their research interests in interpretation of eighteenth-century ethical thought. First, the final chapter describes three philosophers' histories of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century moral philosophy—Stewart, Mackintosh, and Whewell. Second, Rivers provides excellent primary and secondary bibliographic references.

Rivers's work is squarely in the history of ideas and, as such, may not be to the taste of some contemporary practitioners, especially those who align themselves with the analytic tradition. She does not advance any particular arguments about

the views of notables such as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Butler, or Hume. Rather, the purpose and the achievement of her investigation is to trace the influence of early latitude-men or “latitudinarians” on these thinkers and, further, to highlight the legacy of Shaftesbury’s work on his contemporaries and on later British ethical thought. Yet, it will be useful and agreeable to those philosophers interested in and who love the history of ethics and, in particular, eighteenth-century British ethics. The first volume is probably more of interest to theologians and religious studies scholars. Also, the first volume offers much more detail than the second about the source of conceptual shifts in British ethical thought. So, while the second volume can stand alone, the serious researcher and careful scholar will desire both.

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NOTE

1 *British Moralists, 1650–1800*, ed. D. D. Raphael, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969; reprinted Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990), 1: vi.