

Michael Gill. *The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. viii + 359. ISBN 0-521-85246-3, Cloth, \$85.00.

Michael Gill begins his book with what he terms “the Human Nature Question”: “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?” (1). The story he goes on to tell is of how the Human Nature Question shaped British moral philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is a story that begins with the negative answer to the Human Nature Question given by Calvinist divines such as William Perkins, Fellow of Christ’s, Cambridge from 1584 to 1594, and afterward an influential lecturer at the Cambridge church of St. Andrew’s. Perkins preached that “the affections of heart, as love, joy, hope, desire, etc., are moved and stirred to that which is evil to embrace it, and they are never stirred to that which is good unless it be to eschew it” (quoted, 8). On such a view, God’s grace, given in return for Christ’s sacrifice of himself upon the cross, is a necessary condition of redemption for human beings. Virtue requires an overcoming and transcendence of what is given as a matter of nature, and thus Calvinism of Perkins’s kind forges a tight connection between virtue and the Christian religion. Gill charts the way in which British philosophers disposed to give a positive answer to the Human Nature Question slowly came to terms with the fact that, once virtue is taken to be something natural to human beings, it is no longer clear what relation, if any, there is between being a good person and being a good Christian.

The first philosopher to recognise the consequences for Christianity of a positive answer to the Human Nature Question was, according to Gill, Shaftesbury. Before him, Cambridge Platonists such as Benjamin Whichcote and Ralph Cudworth had returned a positive answer to the question while at the same time attempting to hold on to the Calvinist conception of the overriding importance of Christ’s sacrifice. Gill describes Cudworth as having in fact seen through to the tension between his answer to the Human Nature Question and his Christian belief, most obviously in his *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, from which Christ is completely absent, replaced by a “complete and uncompromising picture of how, through the use of reason, human minds can participate with the mind of God” (74). But Cudworth was not comfortable with the implications of his positive answer. Shaftesbury had no such qualms as regards the fate of Christian belief. Virtue as described in *The Moralists* has nothing whatsoever to do with Christian doctrine. Virtue is, of course, defined in religious terms, as judgment and action that is in accord with the goodness and beauty

of God's creative energy, but the God of *The Moralists* is not a distinctively Christian God. As Gill puts it, "For Shaftesbury, God is still the cornerstone of morality. But Christ has left the building" (117). At the same time, there are signs in Shaftesbury of a still more radical departure from Calvinism. Much of Shaftesbury's philosophy, Gill correctly asserts, is deeply marked by the rationalism of the Cambridge Platonists. But when Shaftesbury argues in answer to the skeptic that, irrespective of the truth or falsity of our speculative beliefs, still, there is reason to be virtuous in the mental enjoyments that virtue makes possible, there occurs what Gill describes as "a kind of Copernican Revolution in moral philosophy" (130). For then "the study of morality becomes the study of human nature" (130), and is no longer conceived in terms of access through reason to a vision of life in harmony with divine design.

Gill moves from Shaftesbury to Hutcheson, whom he sees, again correctly, as much more concerned to refute the negative answer given to the Human Nature Question by Hobbes and Mandeville than to answer the rationalism of such as Cudworth, Clarke, and Balguy. Of course, Hutcheson did attack rationalism, and as he did so he undermined the very idea of, in Gill's words, "[t]he kind of moral reality most seventeenth-century rationalists sought—a morality originating entirely in rationally necessary, eternal and immutable, mind-independent truth" (171). Hutcheson's is an entirely "Copernican" moral philosophy. It is not, though, an entirely secular moral philosophy. At least, Hutcheson, even if he was prepared to allow the possibility of virtuous atheism, wanted his theory, as Gill puts it, "to imply the existence of God" (173). Human nature as described by Hutcheson exhibits a harmoniousness that is only rationally explicable in terms of the intentions of an intelligent and benevolent creator. But Hutcheson's theistic agenda placed his empirical science of man under strain, since it required him, in a rather question-begging manner, to explain away all interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict in terms of unnatural associations of ideas. It took Hume to push the Copernican Revolution in moral philosophy to its logical, fully secular, conclusion. Hume "sought to account for the observable facts of human behaviour without recourse to any theistic or supernatural causes" (208), and as he did so, he severed altogether the connection between theology and moral philosophy. Moreover, as he did so, he undermined the basis of the Human Nature Question itself. On Hume's view, human beings are neither naturally virtuous nor naturally vicious. He rejects wholesale the static and "originalist" conception of human nature that is implicit in the framing of the Human Nature Question. And he develops an account of moral judgment as inherently comparative, such that no possibility is left of giving the question a decisive answer either way.

The idea that what distinguishes Hume's moral philosophy from that of almost all of his predecessors and contemporaries is its secularity is not a new one. The lack of a role for religious belief in his conception of virtue was remarked upon by at least some of his contemporaries. Both James Balfour and William Paley, for

example, claimed that Hume's self-confessed inability to give a decisive answer to the Sensible Knave could be traced to his having failed to draw on the motivational resources offered by Christian revelation. Nor has the secularity of Hume's moral philosophy been ignored by recent scholarship. It is noted and expanded upon by, for example, Isabel Rivers in the second volume of her *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), a book that covers a good deal of the same ground as *The British Moralists and Human Nature*, and yet, strangely, is absent from its bibliography. It is explored in connection with Hume's debt to Bayle and Mandeville in John Robertson's *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), also missing from Gill's bibliography. Preliminary investigations were made in the 1970s and 1980s by David Norton and John Gaskin, in articles to which, again, Gill makes no reference. What is innovative and interesting in Gill's account is the postulation of a source for Humean secularity in ethics in such sincerely religious philosophers as Whichcote, Cudworth, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson. I don't think Gill would wish to discount the importance to Hume of more openly skeptical and subversive thinkers like Bayle and Mandeville. His story is a supplement to currently received wisdom, not a correction of it, and deserves careful consideration by anyone concerned with a full understanding of the origins of Hume's philosophy.

As is inevitable with a book that offers bold and wide-ranging interpretations of a number of important philosophical figures, there is much in *The British Moralists and Human Nature* that might have benefited from more detailed treatment. I shall conclude this review with just one instance. Gill claims that the religious aspect of Hutcheson's ethics is limited to an attempt to use the balance of the affections as another means of proving the existence of an intelligent and benevolent creator God. Now, there is no doubt that Hutcheson does indeed return a positive answer to Gill's Human Nature Question, nor is there any doubt that Hutcheson himself was aware of the challenge his moral philosophy posed to Augustinian Christianity. In *Illustrations upon the Moral Sense*, Hutcheson notes that some "Christian moralists" hold the selfish view of motivation first espoused by Epicureans and later revived by Hobbes, La Rochefoucauld, and other modern cynics and skeptics. But Hutcheson's confidence in the natural resources that morality is able to draw upon is complicated and mitigated when he brings into focus what he calls the "public sense," "our Determination to be pleased with the *Happiness* of others, and to be uneasy at their *Misery*." In the *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions*, and also in the posthumous *System of Moral Philosophy*, Hutcheson registers the manner in which the pains of the public sense tend to destabilize and weaken natural dispositions to virtue, and looks to belief in providence and a life after death as the means of restoring stability and strength to those dispositions. "This Belief of a Deity, a Providence, and a *future State*," he writes in the *Essay*, "are the only sure Supports to a good Mind."

In the *System* he has it that “we can never be secure, nor can we enjoy true serenity and tranquillity of mind, without a firm persuasion that [God’s] goodness, wisdom, and omnipotence are continually employed in securing the felicity of the objects of our noblest affections.” The same use of the tenets of theism is made by Shaftesbury in the *Inquiry*, and by a host of later writers including Kames, Smith, Balfour, and Reid. Throughout the eighteenth century, confidence in human nature has to be balanced against a sense of the threat to virtue that is posed by the prevalence of natural and moral evils.

When seen in this context, one of the things that is most remarkable in Hume’s analysis of virtue is the complete absence of religious belief considered as a stabilizing and infixing force. It raises the question of what, if anything, plays the same role in his moral philosophy, especially as regards those “artificial” virtues which have no basis in the nature that we are born with. Gill is right to emphasize the fact that Hume’s break with “originalist” or “static” conceptions of human nature enables him to distinguish between the historical causes of the institution of justice from the basis of the sense of being morally obliged to act as the rules of justice dictate (see 237–40). Sympathy is of course the key to Hume’s account of how acts of justice and injustice come to be viewed in moral terms. But it is not clear that Hume himself regards sympathy as able to do much towards providing spectators of the moral scene with motivation to *act* in accord with the principles that inform their judgments. In fact, Hume never fails to take the opportunity to voice doubts as to the motivational efficacy of sympathy-based moral judgments. Sympathy, he observes towards the end of *Treatise* 3.2.2, “is too weak to controul our passions,” even while it “has sufficient force to influence our taste, and give us the sentiments of approbation or blame.” The contradiction between “extensive sympathy” and “limited generosity” mentioned in *Treatise* 3.3.1 is resolved by drawing attention again to the fact that “Sentiments must touch the heart, to make them controul our passions: But they need not extend beyond the imagination, to make them influence our taste.” It is hard to resist the conclusion that the real work as regards instilling a practical regard for the artificial virtues is done by a combination of “the artifice of politicians,” “private education and instruction,” and “the interest of our reputation,” the things that Hume describes in *Treatise* 3.2.2 as “forwarding” the sympathy-based progress of the sentiments towards moral assessment of justice and injustice. If this is right, then Hume may yet be more of a Baylean and Mandevillian than Gill allows.

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