

The Eighteenth-Century Dissenters’ Contribution to Moral Philosophy

The eighteenth-century Dissenters had their ethical roots partly in the works of Grotius, Pufendorf and others, but also in those massive Puritan bodies of practical divinity which might, as in the case of Thomas Watson’s work of 1692, comprise expositions of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, the Decalogue and the Lord’s Prayer. To the Puritans theology and ethics comprised an harmonious whole. The fact that God had spoken had implications for conduct. A running theme of Paul’s letters: if this is what you believe, then this is how you should live, was congenial to the Puritan mind. Time-lags being as they are in intellectual history, this approach was still followed by some Dissenters in the eighteenth century, notably by the high Calvinist Baptist John Gill (1697-1771).¹

Having expounded the entire Bible, Gill published his *Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* in 1769-70. His stance is clearly indicated on the first page of his Introduction:

Doctrine has an influence upon practice, especially evangelical doctrine, spiritually understood, affectionately embraced, and powerfully and feelingly experienced. . . . Where there is not the doctrine of faith, the obedience of faith cannot be expected. . . . Doctrine and practice should go together; and in order both to know and do the will of God, instruction in doctrine and practice is necessary; and the one being first taught will lead to the other.²

On this basis Gill proceeds through the Christian doctrines from God to eschatology (though reserving ecclesiology for his practical chapters concerning worship), Christian virtues and practice, and private and public duties. This clearly sets him in the line of such Reformed thinkers as Witsius and Macovius, and of his fellow-countrymen William Perkins and William Ames. Thus, as Richard Muller has pointed out, Gill ‘rooted himself in a theology that was far more compatible with his understanding of Christian doctrine than the Anglican theology that inhabited the English universities of his time.’³ All of which means that the self-

educated Gill, though he was contemporary enough in his polemics against deists, antinomians, Arminians and others, was not in the van of his century's ethical discussion.

More typical of the moral philosophy of the eighteenth century is the increasing divorce of moral questions from theological. Many divines came to see that it would no longer suffice to confine ethics to expositions of the Decalogue or the Beatitudes. This is by no means to say that the Dissenters (or the Anglican divines for that matter) excluded God from their ethical writings; but their tone becomes gradually less homiletic, or more technical, with the realization that intellectual challenges in ethics as elsewhere must be met on their own terms. The arguments of Hobbes and Shaftesbury served as stimuli in this respect. Concurrently, there arises the conviction that, while special revelation is by no means redundant – indeed, it is essential as acquainting people with the mind and will of God (and thus the deists are wrong), morality rests on an universal, rational basis. In view of this the recourse of many eighteenth-century moral philosophers to continental post-Reformation natural law theories and to Cicero and the Stoics is not surprising.⁴ Nor, closer to home, should the influence of the Cambridge Platonist Benjamin Whichcote (1609-1683) and others be overloaded. In heady sectarian days he advocated a reasonable, ethical Christianity over against the then prevalent dogmatic scholasticism.

In the story of this transition from what we might call Puritan ethics to modern ethics, Isaac Watts (1674-1748) and Henry Grove (1683/4-1738) are 'bridge' persons. Indeed, Grove, as we saw, with no intention of disparaging divinity, separated dogmatics from ethics in his academy curriculum.⁵ Unsurprisingly, those who did most to advance the cause of ethical discussion were divines of a generally open disposition. For the most part they were educated in the more doctrinally tolerant – even liberal – academies. By the end of the century some of them were distinctly radical. But even among the more open-minded there were those like John Aikin (1713-80), of whom it was said that 'His lectures on Morals and Theology, and his comments upon the Holy Scriptures, were adapted to improve the heart, as well as to inform the understanding.'⁶

What were the issues in moral philosophy tackled by the eighteenth-century Dissenters? In the turbulent politico-religious situation following the Reformation, recourse was had by Grotius, Pufendorf and others to natural law, and the resulting obligations upon rulers and ruled alike. Their works were among those read in a number of the early Dissenting academies, and their influence upon Watts, Grove and their Dissenting successors was considerable. As Sidgwick showed long ago, this

emphasis upon natural law gave rise to such questions as, 'What is man's ultimate reason for obeying these laws? Wherein does their agreement with his rational and social nature exactly consist? How far, and in what sense, is his nature really social?'⁷ The consideration of such questions in Britain took the form it did largely in response to the perceived threat posed by Hobbes. Indeed, Sidgwick declares that 'for two generations the efforts to construct morality on a philosophical basis take more or less the form of answers to Hobbes.'⁸ Between Hobbes and the eighteenth-century Dissenters came the Cambridge Platonists, Cumberland, Locke and Clarke, all of whom in their several ways repudiated Hobbes's materialism, and his hypothesis that unless state power were concentrated in one man or assembly of men, a reversion to the state of nature would ensue in which the human life would be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.'⁹ Further, the general tendency of these writers was away from Hobbes's reduction of the natural law to a law of self-preservation.¹⁰ To them it was the moral basis for living, supplying common ground on which all reasonable people could stand. As Locke put it, the law of nature is 'the Will and Law of a God.' It is 'the decree of the divine will discernible by the light of nature and indicating what is and what is not in conformity with rational nature, and for this very reason commanding or prohibiting.'¹¹

In the wake of Hobbes ethical discussion tended in two directions. On the one hand there were writers primarily interested in politics, economics and statecraft; on the other hand there were writers (sometimes the same ones) who, on the assumption that moral properties are objective, went in quest of an answer to the question how our moral obligations are determined. Are we indebted to intuitions of reason, or of a special moral sense? Concerning the latter, while thinkers as diverse as Descartes, Hobbes, Henry More and Locke had, in varying degrees, adverted to the human mind's passions and sentiments, it was Shaftesbury (1671-1713) who gave the cue to those – supremely Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) – who sought, on analogy with knowledge-yielding physical senses, to ground ethics in a moral sense. Shaftesbury's methodological contribution, which grew out of his opposition to established religion and its educational institutions, lay in his determination to make the constitution of human nature, not the purposes and promises of God, central to his ethics..¹²

We shall see that while political questions could never be far from the minds of Dissenters – especially those concerning liberty of belief and worship, their moral philosophy was undergirded by the discussion of moral ends, and of the ways in which we determine our duty. Some Dissenters were in the stream of rational intuitionism flowing down from

Ralph Cudworth and Samuel Clarke, while others were indebted to, and in the case of at least one who wrote on ethics, taught by, Francis Hutcheson.¹³ Yet others adopted an eclectic approach.¹⁴

Let us now turn to these generally neglected thinkers.¹⁵ I shall first treat them in chronological order, and indicate some of their main concerns in moral philosophy; and I shall then consider one theme, that of freedom, which exercised them all in one way or another. As we proceed we should remind ourselves that their thinking was done at a time when the idea that the individual has a right (over against authorities whether ecclesiastical or secular) freely to exercise reason and conscience was gaining ground;¹⁶ and when older notions – for example, that an atheist (the psalmist's 'fool' = immoral person, who says in his heart there is no God) cannot be a morally upright person – lingered strongly in many Christian minds.

I

Isaac Watts

Isaac Watts evinces a strong interest in the moral law. This emerges, for example, in a discourse on 'The perpetual obligation of the moral law, the evil of sin, and its desert of punishment.' He defines the moral law thus:

The moral law signifies that rule which is given to all mankind to direct their manners or behaviour, considered merely as they are intelligent and social creatures, as creatures who have an understanding to know God and themselves, a capacity to judge what is right and wrong, and a will to chuse and refuse good and evil. This law, I think, does not arise merely from the abstracted nature of things, but also includes in it the existence of God, and his will manifested in some way or other, or at least within the reach of our knowledge: it includes also his authority, which obliges us to walk by the rule he gives us.¹⁷

This law is given in the Decalogue, and it is 'scattered up and down through all the writings of the new Testament.' It was written by God's finger on tablets of stone; it was written by God's inspiration in the Bible, and 'it is written in the hearts and consciences of mankind by the God of nature. The voice of God from heaven acclaimed this law, the voice of the prophets and apostles confirm it, and the voice of conscience, which is the vicegerent of God in the heart of man, speaks the same thing.'¹⁸

In a note Watts explains that the moral law comprises the natural law which arises from the natural principles of reason, and the written law given at Sinai. The natural law, which contains moral precepts addressed

to all human beings, 'lies within the reach of all men whose consciences are not grossly blinded or hardened by sin;' the written law is clearer, and also contains ceremonial regulations prescribed for the Jewish people; but 'the grand requirements and the design of both these are the same. . . .'¹⁹

The moral law is of universal and perpetual obligation: 'It springs from the very relation of his creatures to their Maker and to one another.'²⁰ In answer to the question whether it is reasonable on God's part to require perfect obedience to the law from fallen humanity, Watts maintains that although human powers are vitiated, 'God continues still to demand a perfection of obedience; he cannot give an imperfect law, or a law that requires but an imperfect obedience to it.'²¹ The grace of the Gospel provides 'a relief for us under our failings,' but it does not abate the demands of the law. Those saved by grace do not perfectly obey the law, yet God still requires such obedience. Indeed, 'it is one great design of the gospel to restore us again to a chearful and regular obedience to [the moral law].'²²

It is quite clear that Watts understands that all people have the ability, by the use of their reason, to grasp the dictates of the moral law. But, in his eclectic way, he also has a place for a moral sense. He does not develop a sensationalist theory as Hutcheson did, still less does he pit a moral sense against rational intuitions; and he is by no means the first to advert to such a sense. He appeals to what he takes to be a moral experience common to, and recognizable by, all. He does this, for example, in a sermon on 'The universal rule of equity.' He here expounds Matthew 7: 12, 'All things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them; for this is the law and the prophets.' He writes,

This excellent precept of Christ, carries greater evidence to the conscience, and a stronger degree of conviction in it, than any other rule of moral virtue. . . . [T]here is not much need of a reason to find it out; for we reach the proof of it from within ourselves, even from our own inward sensation and feeling. If we would know what is just and equitable to do to our neighbour, we need but ask our own inward sense, and our conscience together, what we would think equitable and just to receive from him.²³

What is more, with this precept our Saviour, knowing the power of self-love, 'wisely takes this very principle of self-love, and joins it in the consultation with our reason and conscience, how we should carry it forward to our fellow-creatures. Thus by his divine prudence, he constrains even this selfish and rebellious principle to assist our

consciences and our rational powers in directing us how to practise the social duties of life.’²⁴

Impressive though the natural law is, revelation is nonetheless required. Watts makes this point strongly in a work entitled, *Self-love and virtue reconciled only by religion*. In the context of a critique of atheism and deism he writes as follows:

It is granted, the most general rules of duty, the chief outlines and boundaries of vice and virtue, may be discovered by the reasoning powers of man, if rightly employed; but these discoveries are so few, and some of them are so feebly impressed upon the minds of the multitude, that, in many cases, they leave but a general glimmering light, and give but a doubtful direction. . . . But God, by revelation of his will in scripture, has given so bright a discovery of these general boundaries between vice and virtue, and made plain a multitude of these particular duties both by many express commands, and prohibitions, and various parallel examples, both of vice and virtue, that even the common people may learn what they are to believe, and what they are to practice, or avoid, by a far more easy and ready way of instruction. Milk-maids and plowmen, and the menest offices or capacities in the world may learn their duty here.²⁵

For our final glimpse of Watts we shall turn to the question of truthfulness – a theme which concerns him greatly, and on which we find him at his most casuistical. He has eleven sermons on ‘Christian morality,’ all of them based on Philippians 4: 8, ‘Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report . . . think on these things.’ Of these sermons, two are on ‘Whatsoever things are true.’ He sets out from the observation that we need both ‘the furniture of the head’ and the integrity of the heart²⁶. Accordingly, truth encompasses veracity, faithfulness and constancy. The light of nature requires us to practise truth, but in addition we have a Gospel of truth from the God of truth. It follows that ‘no circumstances whatsoever can make a lie lawful.’²⁷ In an appendix to the first three sermons Watts considers the question of the lie told for good ends. He illustrates his point by reference to Rahab, the harlot of Joshua 2: 4, 5, who hid the Israelite spies, told the messengers of the king of Jericho that she did not know whence they came nor whither they went, and was commended for this by Paul (*sic*) in Hebrews 11: 31. Reflecting upon this, Watts first makes it clear that an utterly unlawful action does not become lawful when performed for good ends. The law of God is not

thus to be manipulated. What, then, of Rahab's commendation? Although a 'woman of evil fame in Jericho,' she had heard of God's intention to establish the Israelites in the land of Canaan, and she assisted them in their conquest of the land. For this she was approved. But 'she used a very sinful method of accomplishing this design.' Moreover, 'The timorousness of her temper was a sore temptation to her; and though she fell into a criminal action, yet God so far excused the ill conduct, as to forgive the falsehood. . . . But the lie, though it was pardoned, remains still a blemish to her character.'²⁸ Furthermore, 'A woman of her character, living in a heathen country, may well be supposed to have had little knowledge of the sinfulness of so beneficial a lie as that was, and no scruple about it.'²⁹ Watts proceeds in some detail to consider the possibility that there may be those – children, cheats and others – who may be incapable of receiving the truth, or may be deemed not to deserve to hear it. In all cases Watts urges truthfulness. Even if one should lose one's life as a consequence of speaking the truth, the advice stands. Such a person 'dies a martyr to the truth; his name shall be registered with honour among the saints of God on earth, and his soul shall have its place among the martyrs in the upper world.'³⁰

Henry Grove and Thomas Amory

Henry Grove's substantial work, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, was published posthumously in two volumes by his nephew and successor, Thomas Amory (1700/1-1774) in 1749. The preface and the concluding eight chapters were contributed by Amory himself. In his preface Amory informs us that Grove used his manuscript for over thirty years in instructing youth. On his death-bed he charged Amory to ensure its publication.

Morality, says Grove, is the knowledge and practice of those things that concern human beings as moral agents. To pursue the moral path is the way to happiness, for 'the design of Morality is to unite the distracted opinions of mankind in one uniform invariable idea of happiness, to lead them to the enjoyments (*sic*) in which it is to be found, and to direct to the means for the attainment of it.'³¹ Virtuous practice is of paramount importance, but it needs to be grounded in good theory. No doubt not all are equipped for such philosophical work, but gentlemen, lawyers and divines should pay heed to it. It might, however, be objected, 'To examine these matters by *Reason*, when we have *Revelation* . . . is like lighting up a candle at noon-day.'³² It is certain that revelation enables us to see our duty plainly and easily, but it is nevertheless useful for the Christian to investigate the foundations of moral goodness, and to distinguish the several virtues by right reason. Moreover, reason guards us against false

ideas of God, and against irresponsible appeals to Scripture – as when people appeal to the example of Rahab when they wish to tell a lie. We also need reason to show that the general plan of the Gospel accords with it, and to help us choose between conflicting duties.

Morality is within the capacity of all who are sincere and well disposed. The scholar will give a better account of it than the mechanic, but ‘Morality, being the concern of all, must be within the reach of all.’³³ The data of morality are God and man, and the fundamental duty is to know and meet our obligations. The end of morality is happiness – not absolute happiness which, owing to human degeneracy is unattainable, but ‘the highest attainable by man in the present circumstances of his Being.’³⁴ However adverse a believer’s circumstances may now be, God rewards the virtuous with an happiness in the after life, which is not fully bestowed here below.

Grove then turns upon Hobbes, who denies all natural distinctions of good and evil, yet declares that morality is capable of demonstration. He can do this, protests Grove, only because, as he says, ‘we ourselves are the authors of the difference between Justice and Injustice, by the establishment of Laws and Conventions, to which moral good and evil owe all their being’³⁵ As for Locke’s view³⁶ that morality is as capable of demonstration as mathematics, Grove finds the reason given for this unacceptable. Locke thinks that moral terms stand for ideas in the mind, and that we can be clear concerning these. But this, says Grove, presupposes rather than proves the certainty of morality; and we need to be able to show that ‘my ideas connected with praise or dispraise, with good or ill desert, have a foundation in the nature of things.’³⁷ In other words, to demonstrate that one is morally obliged to act in a certain way is more than a matter of defining terms; it has to do with the deliverances of the natural law. On this basis Grove proceeds to elaborate upon the themes of happiness, human actions and passions, and the freedom of the will (to which we shall return).

Part II of Grove’s work opens with a discussion of conscience. While the external, supreme and ultimate law is the law of God, ‘the *internal, subordinate, and immediate* Rule of every man’s actions is his own *Conscience*.’³⁸ Conscience is not a power or faculty distinct from reason, but is ‘the reasoning or judicative faculty of the Mind.’³⁹ Thus, ‘Conscience is a man’s Reason or Understanding, considered in the relation it bears to his Actions, in their moral Nature, and most important Consequences.’⁴⁰ Conscience has to do both with the practical principles by which it guides its judgment of all actions, and with the actions themselves. The will of God, whether discerned by reason or revelation, is the only rule immediately binding upon the conscience. Parents,

magistrates and others may bind our conscience in things indifferent and within their jurisdiction. There is a natural conscience possessed by all, and an enlightened conscience which benefits from revelation, but nevertheless has its foundation in the natural conscience. A conscience which is objectively morally good has as its object the good life; and evil conscience 'has lost more or less the sense it ought to have of the distinctions of *moral* good and evil.'⁴¹

As for obligation, 'The true notion of *Obligation* is a *moral Necessity* of doing actions, or forbearing them.'⁴² All laws are obligatory, but what is it which gives authority to one person over another? According to Hobbes and Spinoza (as understood by Grove) it is the prerogative of the most powerful to impose their will on others in the state of nature. Against this Grove protests that the notions of authority and power are different and separable. Either can be present in a given situation without the other. Again, when Hobbes posits a state of nature in which every person is a king without subjects, he flies in the face of what everyone else has always thought, namely that 'all authority from the highest to the lowest had a proportionable degree of obligation answering to it.'⁴³ (Grove and his contemporaries could not easily surrender the idea of the orders of society and the duties appropriate to each in his or her station). Furthermore, Hobbes wishes to hold both that the possession of power confers the right to govern, and that some have a natural right to govern. The problem is further complicated when Hobbes declares that God's irresistible power is the foundation and source of his sovereignty. This means, says Grove, that God has a right to do whatever he has the power to do: he could rightfully damn innocent creatures. But this 'is a monstrous contradiction; for either it cannot be exercised, or the exercise of it will be incompatible with the very being of several divine Attributes. It is a contradiction to say, there is such a right but it *cannot* be exercised; for what should hinder?' Hence,

From all that has been offered I infer, that if we can suppose this boundless right in God over his creatures, we must suppose it possible for this right to be exercised; but on the other hand it is undeniable, that the full exercise of this right would be *inconsistent* with *goodness, holiness, and wisdom*: wherefore I conclude, that either there are no such perfections in God, or he is possess of *no* such right.⁴⁴

Grove proceeds to discuss the law of nations, civil and canon law, and natural law, of which he says (with indebtedness to Cicero), that it is 'the *fundamental* Law, upon which all other Laws, whether *divine* or *human* are built, and the *great fountain* of *moral truths*. . . .'⁴⁵ The law of nature requires a thing, it does not merely warrant it. More specifically,

The *Law of nature* is the *Will of God* relating to *human Actions*, grounded in the *moral differences* of things: and because *discoverable* by *natural light*, *obligatory* upon *all mankind*.⁴⁶

Grove advances an *a priori* demonstration of the natural law grounded in a consideration of the divine and human natures, and then develops an argument which is partly *a priori* and partly *a posteriori*:

1. There is a *natural and essential difference* between *Virtue* and *Vice*, and those several actions and dispositions which are denoted by these two opposite terms.
2. *Natural Reason* discovers it to be the *Will of God* in this case, that every man should look upon this *difference* in the nature of things and actions, as a *Law* or *Rule*, which he is always religiously to observe, under *pain* of his *Maker's displeasure*.⁴⁷

There follows a further rebuke to Hobbes for supposing that left to themselves people would harm one another. Cumberland, declares Grove, has capably disposed of this suggestion, and Grove draws an analogy between Descartes and Hobbes:

In order to be *certain* of *something*, *Des Cartes* would first have us *doubt* of *every thing*; and so Mr. *Hobbs* sets the *world* together by the ears, that he may have an opportunity to show us his art in bringing them to treat of *peace*. Both of them lead us a great way round about, only to bring us at last to the very same place where they first found us.⁴⁸

Far from being naturally hostile to one another, human beings are lovers of beauty, and they are creatures 'formed for religion . . . God has designed the *nature of things* as an *interpretation* of his will. . . .'⁴⁹ God himself is just, good, merciful and true, and he 'hath shown it to be his will, that men should practise virtue, by so *forming the mind*, that *propositions* containing the *principal* duties of morality are no sooner understood, but *assented* to. . . .'⁵⁰

The law of nature is necessary, eternal, universal and immutable. From this law are deduced our obligations to love God and our fellow creatures, and to regulate our own self-love. This leads Grove to an extensive consideration of virtues and vices: prudence, sincerity, fortitude, sobriety, temperance, justice, truth and faithfulness. With his remarks upon faithfulness his own work ends, and Amory adds his chapters.

Amory discusses the themes of restitution, deliverative justice, marriage, parental authority, government, universal benevolence and piety. In the concluding chapter he says that while this study of the principles and rules of religion and morality has focused those upon

those discoverable and proveable by reason, 'we cannot conclude without acknowledging our obligations to *Revelation*.'⁵¹ It is the fault of the deists to magnify reason at the expense of divine revelation, but they have the advantage of having been educated in an environment permeated by the Christian revelation, and are thus more advanced in their moral understanding than even the best pre-Christian writers. Hence, 'To judge aright . . . of our obligations to *Revelation*, we should consider the state of the world as *idolotrous*, *ignorant*, and *corrupted* to the grossest degree in their Religion and Morality, and *uncertain* as to the most important truths, when the light of *Revelation* broke forth upon them; and what would have been the probable consequences in all following ages, had not God favoured men in this extraordinary manner. . . .'⁵² While reason can prove a first cause, it is from revelation that we learn the attributes of God and our obligations to him. To revelation we owe the doctrine of a moral and particular providence, a clearer perception of our duties, and the obligation to prevent self-love from blinding ourselves to the just needs of others. From revelation are likewise learned the duties which we owe to ourselves: we are not to live like beasts, but as those who are destined to be heirs of heaven. Further, revelation teaches the truths and duties of morality with authority and (with an acknowledged debt to Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity*) this greatly helps those who have not the leisure or ability to weigh moral matters carefully. The deliverances of revelation do not fluctuate, whereas apart from its authority a person's reason may be blinded by temptation. Again, revelation yields many noble examples for us to follow; its teaching on final rewards and punishments affords a powerful motive to virtue; and its provision of the Christian Church, with its ministry, facilitates the universal spread of knowledge concerning the truths and duties of religion.

Grove's *A System of Moral Philosophy* is the first substantial work devoted to its subject by an eighteenth-century Dissenter. For this reason, and also because of its long use in manuscript as a teaching resource in Grove's academy, I have outlined its contents in some detail. But Grove had much to say concerning morality in his other writings. Two themes to which he constantly reverts may be mentioned.

First, like many others in his time, Grove, while emphasising the conscientious rights of the individual, and also the need to maintain a proper self-love, also clearly understands that human beings live in societies. In this latter capacity they contribute to the happiness or misery of their fellow creatures. In order to increase the happiness of others Grove extols benevolence as a virtue. Once again Hobbes's doleful view of humanity is his target: 'I always imagined that kind and benevolent

propensions were the original growth of the heart of man, and, however checked and overtopped by counter inclinations that have since sprung up within us, have still some force in the worst of tempers, and a considerable influence on the best.⁵³ Indeed, Grove cannot conceive that the benevolent God, in creating human beings in his own image, would omit benevolence from their make-up. Reason teaches us this, but so does experience of life, as when we see examples of ‘the pity which arises on sight of persons in distress, and the satisfaction of mind which is the consequence of having removed them into a happier state. . . .’⁵⁴

Secondly, reverting to the objective of happiness, which Grove declares is man’s chief end,⁵⁵ Grove is insistent that the route to this happiness lies in loving God. In a sermon delivered at the ordination of his nephew Thomas Amory and the latter’s friend William Cornish, Grove ranks the obligation to love God above any specific commands of God:

We are obliged to love God not merely because he hath commanded us to love him, but because he hath made us capable of loving him, and both by his perfections and his benefits challenges our love. Did these not oblige us to love him as soon as we were in a condition to make any reflection on them, no subsequent command could oblige us to it. . . . For if there are good reasons why we should love God, now that he commands it, they must be equally reasons for love antecedent to the consideration of any command whatsoever.⁵⁶

In his Preface to the published sermon Grove underlines the point with respect to the issue of self-interest in relation to divine rewards and punishments:

Upon the whole, this notion which resolves all obligation into the promises and threatenings annexed to the law of God, or, which is the same thing, into the hopes and fears of men’s minds raised by them, tho’ it presupposes the will of God which hath enacted the law, and fixed the sanction, yet, under pretence of doing more honour to God and his law, hath in reality no respect to them at all, but terminates wholly in self-interest; whilst the other notion which asserts obligations antecedent in nature to the will of God, carries in it a tacit acknowledgement of the necessary and immutable perfections of God, and of his unmerited favour which hath bestowed being with all the privileges belonging to it: forasmuch as among these antecedent obligations, the obligation to the love of God, and a cheerful obedience to his will, is one of the principal . . . [w]hen God and nature, reason and scripture have joined the

love of God with the hope of a reward, it is but presumption in any man to put them asunder.⁵⁷

Grove's ethics were grounded in his conviction that we are obliged to love God and to show benevolence towards other intelligent beings. We are, moreover, under the commands of God but these, though challenging, are not the sole ground of our obedience. Specific commands apart, all reasonable people will agree that God has created us in such a way that we can love him, and this we ought to do. With this emphasis upon the primacy of the intellect over the will Grove was revealing indebtedness to Cudworth, and laying a trail which both John Taylor and, more definitively, Richard Price, were soon to follow.

John Taylor and Samuel Bourn III

The Presbyterian divine John Taylor (1694-1761)⁵⁸ was educated under Thomas Dixon at Whitehaven academy, whence he proceeded to Findern, Derbyshire, under Thomas Hill.⁵⁹ He ranged widely over the theological disciplines, being awarded the Doctorate of Divinity of the University of Glasgow in 1756 for his *The Hebrew Concordance adapted to the English Bible*, and causing much fluttering in the conservative theological dovescotes with *The Scripture-Doctrine of Original Sin* (1740), and *The Scripture-Doctrine of Atonement Examined* (1751). These sufficed to have him marked down as an Arian. Following a pastorate in Norwich (1733-57), Taylor became the first divinity tutor at Warrington academy, where he remained until his death. It fell to him to teach moral philosophy, and his writings specifically on this subject are *An Examination of the Scheme of Morality advanced by Dr. Hutcheson* (1759), and *A Sketch of Moral Philosophy* (1760). He was indebted to Philips Glover's *An Enquiry concerning Virtue and Happiness* (1751), but also feels that his conversations with Glover over a number of years contributed to the latter's work. He also owed much to *A Review of the Principal Questions of Morals* by his Presbyterian colleague, Richard Price, the first edition of which had appeared in 1757.⁶⁰ It will be convenient if we outline Taylor's ethical works in reverse order.

Taylor intended his *Sketch* as an introduction for young students to William Wollaston's *The Religion of Nature Delineated*, which was first circulated in 1722, and published in 1724.⁶¹ According to Wollaston, the truest definition of religion is '*The pursuit of happiness by the practice of reason and truth.*'⁶² As was appropriate in one suspicious of 'enthusiasm', Taylor launches forth with the assertion that 'Revelation is of no use to us, if it is not an Address to the Understanding and common Sense of Mankind.'⁶³ If we are firmly grounded in the principles of natural religion 'we shall be furnished with a Standard, by which to

measure every part of Revelation; a Standard of the same Authority with Revelation itself.’⁶⁴ While ‘The Rule of right Action lies open to every honest Mind; and all men see, or may see, the Difference between moral Good and Evil, as plainly as they see with their Eyes the Difference of Objects which are before them,’⁶⁵ the discussion of moral principles is the province of a few. The foundation of virtue ‘is that principle, which being supposed, Virtue, or Action morally right, necessarily results.’⁶⁶ Such a principle should be as forceful as any demonstrated proposition of Euclid, though such demonstrations are easier in mathematics, which is not subject to prejudice. Such a principle should apply universally, and should be consistent with liberty or freedom of choice.

The rightness of an action does not depend upon the will or power of the actor; the loss or gain accruing to the actor; or upon the subsequent reflections or affections of the actor or others. The only consideration is the nature and properties of the object. Indeed, ‘To know the Natures of Things, is the same as to know the Obligation to right action.’⁶⁷ Truth is the conformity of our ideas to the natures of things, and all obligations arising from truth are necessary and hence independent, eternal, universal and immutable. The obligations of truth do not depend arbitrarily upon God’s will. On the contrary, ‘The great God himself is necessarily under the Obligations of Truth.’⁶⁸

his Divine Rectitude, or Perfection of Holiness, consists in his constant and invariable Conformity to this eternal and immutable Rule of all right Action. Which indeed is no other than his own infinite, eternal and all-perfect Understanding; which Understanding is the eternal and unchangeable Law, or Rule by which He is directed in all his Actions.⁶⁹

It is by reason that we perceive and understand the truth. Unlike the senses, reason distinguishes, compares and compounds; it implies an obligation to right action because it acquaints us with the natures of things. Freedom and agency are the same thing. A person who acts is free; one who is acted upon is not an agent. To act virtuously, or in a morally right manner, is ‘to treat, or behave towards, all rational and sensible Beings, and the Things which may affect them, according to their Natures, Properties, Relations, and Circumstances, or according to the Truth, so far as known, or apprehended by any particular Agent . . . and to act in a contrary Manner is Vice, or Action morally evil.’⁷⁰ Moreover, ‘All rational Beings, without Exception, are necessarily and unavoidably subject to the Obligations of Virtue.’⁷¹ Even though a judgment is mistaken, a moral agent ought to do what he or she sincerely feels obliged to do. On occasion temptation or trial may alleviate guilt, but they do not ‘lessen the general obligation to virtue.’⁷²