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0521457823 - The British Moralists and the Internal 'Ought': 1640-1740

Stephen Darwall

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Chapter 1

The British moralists: inventing internalism

Ever since Selby-Bigge published his anthology almost a century ago, the term *British moralists* has come to refer to moral philosophers writing in Britain from roughly the time of Hobbes in the middle of the seventeenth century through that of Bentham at the end of the eighteenth.¹ This was a time of extraordinary ferment and creativity throughout Europe, no less in philosophy than in other areas. We call the period “early modern” to mark it as a point of departure, as one that broke in significant ways with forms of thought and organization of earlier periods and to which we can trace many of the terms in which we still encounter issues of intellectual, moral, and political life. No doubt all epochal categories are crude and distorting. Still, it seems undeniable that what we now think of as science, for example, is much more like what Boyle and Newton were engaged in than anything in the ancient world or in what came in between. Similarly, thanks to fundamental changes in political organization and thought just before and during this period, we are far likelier to find problems of political life posed in terms that are recognizably *ours* in the writings of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau than in Renaissance, medieval, or ancient texts, continuing interest in Aristotle notwithstanding.²

The same is true, in large measure, in ethics, especially in *moral* philosophy. Questions about how to live a human life or about what

1. L. A. Selby-Bigge, ed., *British Moralists, Being Selections from Writers Principally of the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1897), reprinted in one volume, with a new introduction by Bernard H. Baumrin (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964). See also D. D. Raphael, ed., *British Moralists: 1650–1800*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); reprint, Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1991. Selections from many of the British moralists are also included in J. B. Schneewind, ed., *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant: An Anthology*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
2. Consider the problem of political obligation, for example.

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does or should matter to us are, naturally, nearly as old as philosophy itself. But it is arguable that only in the early modern period (or just before) did a number of features coalesce into the idea of *morality*, the notion that there exist requirements or *demands* that are binding on all rational persons, even though the conduct demanded may lack any necessary connection to the good of the person obligated.³ Of course, this idea was not universally received; neither is it now. However, it came during this period to be widely thought a very important idea, one many philosophers wanted to understand and defend. And this forced a fundamental question: In what might the universal bindingness of morality consist? What makes morality obligating? And that question forced another even more fundamental: What is it for anything to be binding? What is bindingness, obligation, or, as moral philosophers are inclined to say these days, *normativity* itself? In what does an *ought to do* consist?

THE BACKGROUND

Why was the *general* issue of normativity a special focus for the seventeenth century, however? Even if the conception of morality is an early modern discovery or construction, fundamental questions of justification were staples of ethical thought from ancient times. The difference was the *way* the issue arose. To put the matter much too simply, ancient ethics and its premodern successors assumed a *unified practical object*, the *good*, which, because it is uniquely given as *end*, structures all rational deliberation, and whose status as end is guaranteed *metaphysically*, since it is intrinsic to human nature or part of the basic structure of reality. Presently, I shall describe how these assumptions worked within the classical theory of natural law, deriving from Saint Thomas. But it is perhaps clearest in Aristotle, whose *Nicomachean Ethics* begins with the declaration that, as every action aims at some good, the task of ethics is to discover the chief or

3. On the idea that modern moral philosophy differs from ancient ethics in respect of the idea of *demandingness*, see Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 106; and Nicholas White, "The Imperative, the Attractive and the Repulsive: Sidgwick and Modern Views of Ancient Ethics," in Bart Schultz, ed., *Essays on Henry Sidgwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

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most final good.⁴ By such a good, Aristotle says he means 'the good for man', that is, for the person himself or herself, not any Platonic form.⁵ Deliberation thus makes sense only in relation to this chief good: *eudaimonia*, or a flourishing life for the agent. Moreover, Aristotle's teleological metaphysics assures that this end is given metaphysically, as final cause.⁶ For Aristotle, therefore, practical normativity can be understood only through relation to the agent's good; it is uniquely given *as end*. Against this background, to be something an agent ought to do *just is* to be something that furthers her good.⁷ The main difference from Plato was that Plato believed the good to be person-neutral: Reasons for action are determined by *the good*.

The idea that rational action aims (even uniquely) at the agent's good was hardly absent in the seventeenth century, of course. On the contrary, it was, if anything, the default view. But philosophers could not both reject Aristotelian, teleological metaphysics, as increasingly many did, and claim a *metaphysical* basis for this view.⁸ They could no longer simply assume that there being reason *to do* something, or an action's being something an agent *ought* to do, is *the same thing as* the action's furthering the agent's good. What is more, without teleological metaphysics a harmony of individuals' goods is not metaphysically guaranteed. The possibility that persons' goods might conflict deeply was not only thinkable but urgent. And the question could now be raised: What should a person do if his good does conflict with those of others or, more to the point, with demands general compliance with which is mutually advantageous? Should he promote his own good? Or that of others or of all? More specifically, should he comply with mutually advantageous demands even when it is contrary to his good to do so? These are genuine questions

4. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, I.1–2, trans. W. D. Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). For a discussion of this aspect of ancient ethics in general, see Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. pp. 3–43.

5. *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.4.

6. On this point, see T. H. Irwin, "The Metaphysical and Psychological Basis of Aristotle's Ethics," in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 35–53.

7. This is, of course, consistent with the chief good's being an "inclusive" end, in Hardie's sense, including various intrinsic goods as part of it. See W. F. R. Hardie, "The Final Good in Aristotle's Ethics," *Philosophy* 40 (1965): 277–95.

8. Alasdair MacIntyre has famously argued, of course, that this doomed the "enlightenment project" to failure. See *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), esp. pp. 49–59.

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only if practical normativity is a different thing from relation to the agent's good. And even if the right answers must still be based on egoistic concerns, as many thought, this would now have to be defended as an independent normative thesis without a basis in teleological metaphysics. So the more fundamental question could now arise: In what could the truth of such a thesis consist?

The modern conception of morality developed as a solution to the problem of conflicting interests, especially the problem of conflict among persons who cannot expect to share a common confession or religious discipline. In some ways, its solution is as old as Glaucon's suggestion in the *Republic* that the unrestricted pursuit of self-interest is collectively disadvantageous, and that mutual advantage is served by everyone's acknowledging and following requirements that restrict individuals' pursuit of self-interest.⁹ For Glaucon, though, these demands are simply a *modus vivendi* that individuals rightly seek to evade when they can get away with it. But among the writers we shall be considering, even Hobbes, who is closest to this view, thinks that morality has a more secure normative status than that. And so the question arises, What gives morality this status? And again, What (in general) is normative status anyway?

**CLASSICAL NATURAL LAW VERSUS
 MODERN NATURAL LAW**

Philosophically, the modern conception of morality developed first within the seventeenth-century natural law tradition of Grotius, Pufendorf, and Cumberland, as well as, more generally, Hobbes and Locke.¹⁰ To understand its novelty, we need to survey briefly the classical, Thomistic theory of natural law against which the modern tradition reacted. The idea that there are norms or laws to which all rational human beings are subject – a natural law or law of nature –

9. *Republic*, 358e-360b.
 10. The main works here are Hugo Grotius, *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* (Amsterdam, 1625), translated as *The Law of War and Peace* by Francis W. Kelsey (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1925); Samuel Pufendorf, *De Jure Naturæ et Gentium* (Lund, 1672), translated as *On the Law of Nature and Nations* by C. H. Oldfather and W. A. Oldfather (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934); Bishop Richard Cumberland, *De Legibus Naturæ Disquisitio Philosophica* (London, 1672), translated as *A Treatise of the Laws of Nature* by J. Maxwell (London, 1727); Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London, 1651); and John Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, edited and translated from the Latin by W. von Leyden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954). Locke's *Essays* were probably composed in the 1660s; see Chapter 2, note 1.

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goes back as far as the Stoics. Not until Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, however, was it developed systematically. For Thomas, natural law is a formulation of 'eternal law', God's ideal or archetype for all of nature – "the exemplar of divine wisdom . . . moving all things to their *due end*."¹¹ Eternal law specifies the distinctive perfection or ideal state of every natural thing. But while all things are "ruled and measured" by eternal law, rational beings are subject to the law in a distinctive way, since they have "a share of the eternal reason."¹² Uniquely, they are bound by what Aquinas calls 'natural law' – a law that they, unlike nonrational creatures, can follow or flout. Natural law is simply eternal law as applied and made accessible to rational creatures.¹³

Thomas's theory of the good was perfectionist: The good of each being is its perfection.¹⁴ It follows that individuals can realize their respective goods only if they function properly in the overall scheme specified by eternal law. Any deep conflict between their goods is thus ruled out – harmony is guaranteed by perfectionist/teleological metaphysics.¹⁵ It is a consequence also of the way Aquinas based natural law on eternal law that following *natural* law (morality) must lead each to his greatest good. Finally, like Aristotle, Aquinas took each agent's good to be part of his nature *as end*. The normativity of the agent's good is thus built into what he is. Its having intrinsic practical normative relevance – relevance to what he *ought* to do – that the goods of other persons cannot have (for him) is assured metaphysically. This "egoism" is, of course, entirely benign, since an agent will realize her good only if, through following eternal law, she acts in ways that enable others to realize theirs. And they will presumably realize theirs only if she does what will realize hers.

Contrast this with the picture presented by Grotius in *The Law of War and Peace*, the founding work of modern natural law, published in 1625. Grotius begins by considering a skeptical objection to natural

11. *Summa Theologica*, xciii, 1 (emphasis added), in Anton C. Pegis, ed., *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, (New York: Random House, 1945).

12. *Ibid.*, xci, 3.

13. *Ibid.*, xci, 2.

14. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, iii, 16, in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*.

15. For the question of human law and governance, Aquinas recognizes that important issues of conflict arise. See, e.g., *De Regno*, i.1, in Saint Thomas Aquinas, *On Law, Morality, and Politics*, ed. William P. Baumgarth and Richard J. Regan, S.J. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1988). Although these might be raised well enough, consistently with the doctrines relating eternal law and the good just mentioned, in terms of conflicting *beliefs* about the good, Aquinas does speak there about conflicting interests.

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law that simply could not have arisen on the classical view: "[T]here is no law of nature, because all creatures, men as well as animals, are impelled by nature towards ends advantageous to themselves . . . [C]onsequently, there is no justice, or if such there be, it is supreme folly, since one does violence to his own interests if he consults the advantage of others."¹⁶ This objection can be raised only if interests can conflict deeply and if the requirements of natural law can diverge from what would advance the good of those it purports to obligate. On the classical theory, it wouldn't get off the ground.

In fact, Grotius shares his objector's assumption that deep conflict between individuals' goods is possible. And he does not question that natural law may require real sacrifice. It may occasionally be more in an agent's interest, he is willing to allow, to violate norms the collective following of which is best for all. Grotius's response is rather to criticize the assumption that the desire for their own good is the only "impelling desire" rational human beings have. Human nature also includes, he argues, "an impelling desire for society," and the collective following of certain norms (natural laws) is essential to social order. Had Grotius accepted the Thomist picture, however, he could hardly have argued just that we have a desire for peaceful society *along with* the desire for own good, since he would have had to admit the normative priority of the latter. Now, on the classical theory these two desires cannot deeply conflict. There is, indeed, a crucial interdependence between the classical doctrines that the agent's own good is the unique source of practical normativity and that the goods of all are metaphysically harmonized. Grotius denies both doctrines. He assumes that deep conflict is possible and that natural law is required to enable human agents to deal with it peaceably. And he supposes that being an action an agent ought or has reason to do is not the same thing as being an action that furthers the agent's good. So he must face the skeptical objection: Why suppose there are norms by which rational persons are bound requiring them

16. *The Law of War and Peace*, Prolegomena, pp. 10–11. For a discussion of Grotius as responding to the skeptical challenges posed by Montaigne and Charron, see Richard Tuck, "Grotius, Carneades, and Hobbes," *Grotiana*, n.s. 4 (1983): 43–62, and "The 'Modern' Theory of Natural Law," in Anthony Pagden, ed., *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 99–122. Tuck argues that Grotius's response anticipates Hobbes. For a different view, see Robert Shaver, "Grotius on Skepticism and Self-Interest," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, forthcoming.

Grotius puts this objection in the mouth of the Academic skeptic Carneades. Locke considers the very same objection, using Grotius's formulation, in *Essays on the Law of Nature*. See Chapter 2 below.

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to act against their good? And again: What is it, in general, to be under an 'ought'?

THE BRITISH MORALISTS AND THE INVENTION OF INTERNALISM

WHY BRITAIN?

These questions were at the very center of early modern British moral thought and debate from Hobbes on. The influence of an emerging non-Aristotelian science during this period was as great in Britain as anywhere, creating a widespread belief that any defensible moral philosophy, including any acceptable account of moral obligation, must be consistent with modern science, if not itself scientific. These days, we are likely to regard Hobbes's most enduring contribution as the positive account of political and moral obligation he was able to ground on lean epistemological and metaphysical assumptions. His contemporaries, however, widely read him as a nihilist and moral skeptic (as well, of course, as a political absolutist), and many conceived their task as trying to vindicate morality in the face of the Hobbesian challenge. Hobbes had made his contempt for the teleological metaphysics of the schools evident enough. But, with few exceptions, his opponents did not respond by trying to defend Aquinas and Aristotle. They agreed with Hobbes that the schools had been discredited and, therefore, that any acceptable view of the normativity of morals would have to be based on different grounds.

At the same time, Britain was undergoing profound social and political struggle over issues of toleration, liberty, and autonomy during the period of the Civil War and Glorious Revolution, and on into the eighteenth century. In 1689 the Toleration Act was passed, and in 1718 the Schism and Occasional Conformity acts were repealed. These struggles profoundly affected and reshaped the way people thought about moral obligation. A passage from Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans was widely cited (and variously interpreted) in support of the idea that morality obligates all rational persons, even those not bound together by a common faith, because of a common moral capacity: "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves" (2:14). This text had been used for centuries to justify moral community beyond the boundaries of

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revelation.¹⁷ What was new in early modern Britain was the use made of it by philosophers trying to work out a conception of the *autonomy of the moral agent* and to argue that obligation can be understood adequately only if it is properly linked to that.¹⁸

This book is a study of the British moralists' efforts to come to grips with the issue of obligation. Despite its fundamental importance to the early moderns, as well as to moral philosophers of our own period who have inherited it from them, the early history of this problematic has been relatively little studied. The question of *political* obligation as it arises, for example, in the works of Hobbes and Locke has been much discussed. But though more fundamental normative and metaethical issues lying in the background of these discussions are sometimes brought to the fore, they are rarely the central focus. And, in any case, much of the most interesting early modern work on these fundamental issues was done by "lesser" British thinkers – or by greater ones in lesser-known works – that have come to be studied in this century only lately with the recent flowering of the history of modern moral and political thought.¹⁹ No serious study of the

17. On this point, see J. B. Schneewind, "The Use of Autonomy in Ethical Theory," in Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery, eds., *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 64–65.

18. Schneewind's category of philosophers who form a tradition of "autonomy and responsibility" (in *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*) is broader than I here intend, since he includes philosophers who shared the idea that moral knowledge and motivation are universally available to moral agents. This brings in a number of thinkers, Hutcheson and Hume being prominent examples, who did not think that the capacity for self-determining moral agency has anything to do with obligation itself. See *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*, vol. 1, pp. 26–29.

19. In addition to an almost breathtaking increase in the level and depth of scholarship on Hobbes, Hume, Locke, and Kant. Among the most important work on lesser-known early modern ethical writers, I would include Richard Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), in addition to his work on Grotius (mentioned in note 16); J. B. Schneewind, "Kant and Natural Law Ethics," *Ethics* 104 (1993): 53–74, "Pufendorf's Place in the History of Ethics," *Synthese* 72 (1987): 123–55, and "Natural Law, Skepticism, and Method," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52 (1991): 289–308; Knud Haakonssen, "Divine/Natural Law Theories in Ethics," in M. Ayers and D. Garber, eds., *Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); "Moral Philosophy and Natural Law: From the Cambridge Platonists to the Scottish Enlightenment," *Political Science* 40 (1988): 97–110, and "Natural Law and Moral Realism: The Scottish Synthesis," in M. A. Stewart, ed., *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Wolfgang Leidhold, *Ethik und Politik bei Francis Hutcheson* (Freiburg: Alber, 1985); David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), also on Hutcheson. An important

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wealth of significant work by the early modern British moralists on the problem of obligation can fail to take account of Balguy, Cudworth, Cumberland, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Locke's *Essays on the Law of Nature*, as well, of course, as Hobbes, Hume, Butler, and Locke's *Essay*.

INTERNALISM AND EXTERNALISM

Actually, our scope will be narrower even than a general study of the British moralists on obligation. To delimit it properly, however, I need first to say something about the moral philosophy of our own period. Many of the most important debates in contemporary ethical theory have come to turn on the issue of whether *internalism* is true.²⁰ In fact, 'internalism' refers in contemporary discussions to a host of positions on a host of issues. What these have in common is the assertion of a necessary connection between either the having or the truth conditions of ethical or normative thought (or language) and *motivation*.

Sometimes internalism is asserted as a view about the nature of normative thought or language. What I call *judgment internalism* is the position that it is a necessary condition of a sincere or genuine ethical or normative utterance, thought, or conviction – for instance, *that one should x* – that one would, under appropriate conditions, have some motivation to *x*.²¹ According to judgment internalism, nothing counts as a genuine normative or ethical thought or utterance unless it has the appropriate connection to motivation. Internal-

stimulus to much of this work, at least on the side of political philosophy, was Quentin Skinner's monumental *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). Many important ethical texts of this period are collected and illuminatingly introduced in J. B. Schneewind's *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*.

20. The term 'internalism' derives from W. D. Falk's "'Ought' and Motivation," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 48 (1947–48): 492–510, reprinted in *Ought, Reasons, and Morality: The Collected Papers of W. D. Falk* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). Other important discussions include William Frankena, "Obligation and Motivation in Recent Moral Philosophy," in A. I. Melden, ed., *Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958); Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 3–12; Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 101–13; Stephen Darwall, *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 51–61; Christine Korsgaard, "Skepticism About Practical Reason," *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986): 5–25; and Stephen Darwall, "Internalism and Agency," *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 (1992): 155–74.

21. In *Impartial Reason*, p. 54.

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ism of this sort has loomed large in twentieth-century arguments for ethical noncognitivism – that is, for the view that ethical judgments have no cognitive content and so cannot literally be true or false, but rather express noncognitive (in this case motivation-laden) mental states.²²

The other main category of internalisms I call *existence internalisms* because they are concerned with what must be the case for an ethical or normative proposition to be true or for an ethical or normative fact to exist.²³ On all such views, it is a necessary condition of its being the case that someone should *x* that *that person* would, under appropriate conditions, have some motive to *x*. There is, however, an important distinction between two fundamentally different kinds of existence internalism. According to one sort, although motive is in no way intrinsic to ethical facts themselves, it is a necessary consequence of *perceiving* or *knowing* them. This, perhaps, was Plato's position. One cannot know the Good without being moved, although motivation is not itself part of what one knows. Motivation is an effect of the knowing encounter with normativity, not part of normativity itself. It was also the position of the eighteenth-century British rational intuitionists: Samuel Clarke, John Balguy, and, later, Richard Price. And, in a quite different way, it is the view of contemporary "sensitivity" theorists, such as David Wiggins and John McDowell.²⁴

Internalism of this sort, however, does not help us understand what normativity itself is. This was no oversight for the intuitionists, since they thought there is nothing to be said about that. Ethical facts

22. See, for example, Charles Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944); R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952); and Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

23. In *Impartial Reason*, p. 54. For a fuller discussion of the two kinds of existence internalism I am about to distinguish, see my "Internalism and Agency," 157–60, 162–69.

24. See especially John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities," in Ted Honderich, ed., *Morality and Objectivity: A Tribute to John Mackie* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 110–29, and *Projection and Truth in Ethics*, Lindley Lecture, University of Kansas, 1987; and David Wiggins, "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life," "Truth, and Truth as Predicated of Moral Judgments," and "A Sensible Subjectivism?" reprinted in his *Needs, Values, and Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value* (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, 1987). For a discussion, see Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, "Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics: Some Trends," *Philosophical Review* 101 (1992): 115–89, at 152–65; and Darwall, "Internalism and Agency," 159–60.