

# The Theory of Moral Sentiments

Adam Smith

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type.—In Adam Smith’s day a ‘sentiment’ could be anything on a spectrum with feelings at one end and opinions at the other. This work of his is strongly tilted in the ‘feeling’ direction [see especially the chapter starting on page 168], but throughout the present version the word ‘sentiment’ will be left untouched. First launched: July 2008

## Contents

### Part I: The Propriety of Action

1

Section 1: The Sense of Propriety . . . . .	1
Chapter 1: Sympathy . . . . .	1
Chapter 2: The pleasure of mutual sympathy . . . . .	4
Chapter 3: How we judge the propriety of other men’s affections by their concord or dissonance with our own . . . . .	6
Chapter 4: The same subject continued . . . . .	8
Chapter 5: The likeable virtues and the respectable virtues . . . . .	11
Section 2: The degrees of the different passions that are consistent with propriety . . . . .	13
Chapter 1: The passions that originate in the body . . . . .	13

Chapter 2: The passions that originate in a particular turn or habit of the imagination . . . . .	16
Chapter 3: The unsocial passions . . . . .	18
Chapter 4: The social passions . . . . .	21
Chapter 5: The selfish passions . . . . .	22
 Section 3: How prosperity and adversity affect our judgments about the rightness of actions; and why it is easier to win our approval in prosperity than in adversity . . . . .	 25
Chapter 1: The intensity-difference between joy and sympathy with joy is less than the intensity-difference between sorrow and sympathy with sorrow . . . . .	25
Chapter 2: The origin of ambition, and differences of rank . . . . .	27
Chapter 3: The corruption of our moral sentiments that comes from this disposition to admire the rich and the great, and to despise or neglect the downtrodden and poor . . . . .	33
 <b>Part II: Merit and demerit: the objects of reward and punishment</b>	 <b>36</b>
 Section 1: The sense of merit and demerit . . . . .	 36
Chapter 1: Whatever appears to be the proper object of gratitude (resentment) appears to deserve reward (punishment) . . . . .	36
Chapter 2: The proper objects of gratitude and resentment . . . . .	37
Chapter 3: Where there's no approval of the benefactor's conduct, there's not much sympathy with the beneficiary's gratitude; and where there's no disapproval of the motives of the person who does someone harm, there's absolutely no sympathy with the victim's resentment . . . . .	39
Chapter 4: Recapitulation of the preceding chapters . . . . .	40
Chapter 5: Analysing the sense of merit and demerit . . . . .	40
 Section 2: Justice and beneficence . . . . .	 42
Chapter I: Comparing those two virtues . . . . .	42
Chapter 2: The sense of justice, of remorse, and of the consciousness of merit . . . . .	45
Chapter 3: The utility of this constitution of nature . . . . .	47
 Section 3: The influence of luck on mankind's sentiments regarding the merit or demerit of actions . . . . .	 52
Chapter 1: The causes of this influence of luck . . . . .	53
Chapter 2: The extent of this influence of luck . . . . .	55

Chapter 3: The purpose of this irregularity of sentiments . . . . .	58
<b>Part III: Moral judgments on ourselves; the sense of duty</b>	<b>62</b>
Chapter 1: The principle of self-approval and self-disapproval . . . . .	62
Chapter 2: The love of praise and of praiseworthiness; the dread of blame and of blameworthiness . . . .	64
Chapter 3: The influences and authority of conscience . . . . .	71
Chapter 4: The nature of self-deceit, and the origin and use of general rules . . . . .	80
Chapter 5: The influence and authority of the general rules of morality, and why they are rightly regarded as the laws of the Deity . . . . .	84
Chapter 6: When should the sense of duty be the sole driver of our conduct? and when should it co-operate with other motives? . . . . .	90
<b>Part IV: The effect of utility on the sentiment of approval</b>	<b>96</b>
Chapter 1: The beauty that the appearance of utility gives to all the productions of art, and the widespread influence of this type of beauty . . . . .	96
Chapter 2: How the characters and actions of men are made beautiful by their appearance of utility. Is our perception of this beauty one of the <i>basic sources of approval</i> ? . . . . .	100
<b>Part V: The moral influence of custom and fashion</b>	<b>105</b>
Chapter 1: The influence of custom and fashion on our notions of beauty and ugliness . . . . .	105
Chapter 2: The influence of custom and fashion on moral sentiments . . . . .	107
<b>Part VI: The character of virtue</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>Section 1: Prudence, i.e. the character of the individual in its bearing on his own happiness</b> . . . . .	<b>112</b>
<b>Section 2: The character of the individual in its bearing on the happiness of other people</b> . . . . .	<b>115</b>
Chapter 1: The order in which individuals are recommended by nature to our care and attention . . . .	116
Chapter 2: The order in which societies are recommended by nature to our beneficence . . . . .	120
Chapter 3: Universal benevolence . . . . .	125
<b>Section 3: Self-control</b> . . . . .	<b>126</b>

<b>Part VII: Systems of moral philosophy</b>	<b>139</b>
<b>Section 1: The questions that ought to be examined in a theory of moral sentiments</b> . . . . .	139
<b>Section 2: The different accounts that have been given of the nature of virtue</b> . . . . .	139
Chapter 1: Systems that make virtue consist in propriety . . . . .	140
Chapter 2: A system that makes virtue consist in prudence . . . . .	151
Chapter 3: Systems that make virtue consist in benevolence . . . . .	155
Chapter 4: Licentious systems . . . . .	159
<b>Section 3: The different systems that have been formed concerning the source of approval</b> . . . . .	163
Chapter 1: Systems that trace the source of approval back to self-love . . . . .	164
Chapter 2: Systems that make reason the source of approval . . . . .	166
Chapter 3: Systems that make sentiment the source of approval . . . . .	168
<b>Section 4: What different authors have said about the practical rules of morality</b> . . . . .	172

## Part VII: Systems of moral philosophy

### Section 1: The questions that ought to be examined in a theory of moral sentiments

If we examine the most famous and remarkable of the various theories that have been given regarding the nature and origin of our moral sentiments, we'll find that almost all of them coincide with *some part* of the account I have been giving; and that if everything that I have said is fully taken into account, we'll be able to explain what the view or aspect of nature was that led each particular author to form his particular system. It may be that *every* system of morality that ever had any reputation in the world has ultimately come from one or other of the sources that I have been trying to unfold. Because all those systems are in this way based on natural principles, they are all to some extent right. But because many of them are based on a partial and imperfect view of nature, many of them are in some respects wrong.

In discussing the sources of morals we have to consider two questions:

- (1) What does virtue consist in? That is, what kind of temperament and tenor of conduct is it that constitutes the excellent and praiseworthy character, the character that is the natural object of esteem, honour, and approval?
- (2) By what power or faculty in the mind is this character—whatever it may be—recommended. to us? That is, how does it come about that the mind prefers

one tenor of conduct to another, calling one 'right' and the other 'wrong', regarding one as an object of approval, honour and reward, and the other as an object of blame, censure and punishment?

We are addressing (1) when we consider whether virtue consists in •benevolence, as Hutcheson imagines; or in •acting in a way that is suitable to the different relations we stand in, as Clarke supposes; or in •the wise and prudent pursuit of our own real and solid happiness, as others have thought.

We are addressing (2) when we consider whether the virtuous character—whatever it consists in—is recommended to us •by self-love, which makes us perceive that this character in ourselves and in others tends most to promote our own private interests; or •by reason, which points out to us the difference right and wrong behaviour in the same way that it points out the difference between truth and falsehood; or •by a special power of perception called a 'moral sense', which this virtuous character gratifies and pleases while the contrary character disgusts and displeases it; or •by some other drive in human nature, for example some form of sympathy or the like.

I'll address (1) in the next section, and (2) in section 3.

### Section 2: The different accounts that have been given of the nature of virtue

The different accounts that have been given of the nature of virtue, i.e. of what temper of mind makes a character excellent and praiseworthy, can be put into three classes. (1) According to some accounts, the virtuous temper of mind doesn't consist in any one kind of affection but in the **proper** controlling and directing of all our affections, which may be either virtuous or vicious according to the objects they pursue and the level of intensity with which they pursue them. According to these authors, virtue consists in **propriety**.

(2) According to others, virtue consists in the judicious pursuit of our own private interest and happiness, or in the proper controlling and directing of the selfish affections that aim solely at this end. In the opinion of these authors, virtue consists in **prudence**.

(3) Yet another set of authors make virtue consist only in the affections that aim at the happiness of others, not in the ones that aim at our own happiness. According to them, the only motive that can stamp the character of virtue on any action is **disinterested benevolence**.

It's clear that the character of virtue must either •be ascribed to all and any our affections when properly controlled and directed, or •be confined to some one class of them. The big classification of our affections is into *selfish* and *benevolent*. It follows, then, that if the character of virtue can't be ascribed to all and any affections when properly controlled and directed, it must be confined either to •affections that aim directly at our own private happiness or •affections that aim directly at the happiness of others. Thus, if virtue doesn't consist in (1) propriety, it must consist either in (2) prudence or in (3) benevolence. It is hardly possible to imagine any account of the nature of virtue other than these three. I shall try to show later on how all the other accounts that seem different from any of these are

basically equivalent to some one or other of them.

## Chapter 1: Systems that make virtue consist in propriety

According to Plato, Aristotle, and Zeno, virtue consists in the propriety of conduct, or in the suitability of the affection from which we act to the object that arouses it.

(1) In Plato's system (see *Republic* Book 4) the soul is treated as something like a little state or republic, composed of three different faculties or orders.

(i) The first is the judging faculty, which settles not only what are the proper means for achieving any end but also what ends are fit to be pursued and how they should be ordered on the scale of value. Plato rightly called this faculty 'reason', and thought it should be the governing mechanism of the whole. He was clearly taking 'reason' to cover not only the faculty for judging regarding truth and falsehood, but also the faculty by which we judge whether our desires and affections are proper or improper.

Plato put the different passions and appetites that are the natural though sometimes rebellious subjects of this ruling force into two classes or orders. (ii) Passions based on pride and resentment, i.e. on what the scholastics call 'the irascible part' of the soul: ambition, animosity, love of honour and fear of shame, desire for victory, superiority, and revenge. In short, all the passions that lead us to speak metaphorically of people as having 'spirit' or 'natural fire'. [Let 'irascible' be defined here by how it is used here. Outside the Platonic context it means 'angry' or 'irritable'.] (iii) Passions based on the love of pleasure, i.e. on what the scholastics call 'the concupiscible part' of the soul: all the appetites of the body, the love of ease and security, and of all sensual gratifications. [The only use for 'concupiscible' is this Platonic one. It is pronounced con-*kew*-pissible.]

When we interrupt a plan of conduct that **(i)** reason prescribes—a plan that we had in our cool hours selected as the most proper one for us to follow—it is nearly always because we are being prompted by one or other of those two different sets of passions, either **(ii)** by ungovernable ambition and resentment, or **(iii)** by the nagging demands of present ease and pleasure. But though these two classes of passions are so apt to mislead us, they are still regarded as necessary parts of human nature—**(ii)** to defend us against injuries, to assert our rank and dignity in the world, to make us aim at what is noble and honourable, and to make us notice others who act in the same manner; **(iii)** to provide for the support and necessities of the body.

According to Plato the essential virtue of **prudence** involves the strength, acuteness, and perfection of **(i)** the governing force, ·reason·. Prudence, he said, consists in a correct and clear discernment, with the help of general and scientific ideas, of the ends that are proper to pursue and of the means that are proper for achieving them.

When **(ii)** the first set of passions—those of the irascible part of the soul—are strong and firm enough to be able, under the direction of reason, to despise all dangers in the pursuit of what is honourable and noble, that (·said Plato·) constitutes the virtue of **fortitude and magnanimity**. These passions, according to this system, are more generous and noble than **(iii)** the others. It was thought that they are often reason's helpers, checking and restraining the inferior animal appetites. We're often angry at ourselves, objects of our own resentment and indignation, when the love of pleasure prompts to do something that we disapprove of; and when this happens (·Plato held·) **(ii)** the irascible part of our nature is being called in to assist **(i)** the rational part against **(iii)** the concupiscible part.

When those three parts of our nature are in perfect

harmony with one another, when neither the **(ii)** irascible nor the **(iii)** concupiscible passions ever aim at any gratification that **(i)** reason doesn't approve of, and when reason never commands anything that these two wouldn't be willing to perform anyway, this. . . perfect and complete harmony of soul constitute the virtue whose Greek name is usually translated by 'temperance', though a better name for it might be '*good temperament*', or '*sobriety and moderation of mind*'.

**Justice**, the last and greatest of the four cardinal virtues is what you have (according to Plato) when each of those three faculties of the mind confines itself to its proper work without trying to encroach on that of any other, when reason directs and passion obeys, and when each passion performs its proper duty and exerts itself towards its proper end easily and without reluctance, and with the degree of force and energy that is appropriate for the value of what is being pursued. . . .

The Greek word that expresses 'justice' has several meanings; and I believe that the same is true for the corresponding word in every other language; so those various meanings must be naturally linked in some way. •In one sense we are said to do justice to our neighbour when we don't directly harm him or his estate or his reputation. This is the justice that I discussed earlier, the observance of which can be extorted by force, and the violation of which exposes one to punishment. •In another sense we are said to do justice to our neighbour only if we have for him all the love, respect, and esteem that his character, his situation, and his connection with ourselves make it proper for us to feel, and only if we act accordingly. It's in this sense that we are said to do injustice to a man of merit who is connected with us if, though we do him no harm, we don't exert ourselves to serve him and to place him in the situation in which the impartial spectator would be pleased to see

him. [Smith reports on names that have been given to the kinds of justice corresponding to the two senses by Aristotle and the Scholastics and by Hugo Grotius, the pioneering theorist of international law. Then he introduces a third sense of 'justice' which he thinks exists in all languages. It is a sense in which *any* mistake in morals or valuation can be described as not doing justice to something-or-other. He concludes:] This third sense is evidently what Plato took justice to be, which is why he holds that justice includes within itself the perfection of every sort of virtue.

That, then, is Plato's account of the nature of virtue, or of the mental temperament that is the proper object of praise and approval. He says that virtue is the state of mind in which every faculty stays within its proper sphere without encroaching on the territory of any other, and does its proper work with exactly the degree of strength and vigour that belongs to it. This is obviously just what I have been saying about the propriety of conduct.

(2) According to Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* II.5 and III.6) virtue consists in being habitually central, evenly balanced, non-extreme, according to right reason. [Smith: 'consists in the habit of mediocrity according' etc.] In his view every particular virtue lies in a kind of middle between two opposite vices—one offending by being too much affected by something and the other offending by being too little affected by it. Thus the virtue of **fortitude** or **courage** lies in the middle between the opposite vices of •cowardice and of •wild rashness, each of which offends through being •too much or •too little affected by fearful things. The virtue of **frugality** lies in a middle between avarice and profusion, each of which involves •too little or •too much attention to the objects of self-interest. Similarly, **magnanimity** lies in the middle between arrogance and pusillanimity [see note on page 6], each of which involves a •too extravagant or •too weak sentiment

of one's own worth and dignity. I need hardly point out that this account of virtue also corresponds pretty exactly with what I have already said about the propriety and impropriety of conduct.

Actually, according to Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* II.1-4), virtue consists not so much in those moderate and right affections as in the *habit* of this moderation. To understand this you have to know that •virtue can be considered as a quality of an •action or of a •person. Considered as the quality of an •action, it consists in the reasonable moderateness of the affection from which the action comes, whether or not this disposition is habitual to the person (Aristotle agreed with this). Considered as the quality of a •person, it consists in the habit of this reasonable moderateness, i.e. in its having become the customary and usual disposition of that person's mind. Thus, an action that comes from a passing fit of generosity is undoubtedly a generous action, but the man who performs it may not be a generous person because this may be the only generous thing he ever did. The motive and disposition of heart from which this action came may have been right and proper; but this satisfactory frame of mind seems to have come from a passing whim rather than from anything steady or permanent in the man's character, so it can't reflect any great honour on him. . . . If a single action was sufficient to qualify the person who performed it as virtuous, the most worthless of mankind could claim to have all the virtues, because there is no man who hasn't occasionally acted with prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude! But though single good actions don't reflect much praise on the person who performs them, a single vicious action performed by someone whose conduct is usually proper greatly diminishes and sometimes destroys altogether our opinion of his virtue. A single action of this kind shows well enough that his habits are not perfect, and

that he can't be depended on as we might have thought he could, judging by his usual behaviour.

When Aristotle made virtue consist in practical habits (*Magna Moralia* I.1), he was probably saying this against Plato's thesis that just sentiments and reasonable judgments concerning what is fit to be done or to be avoided are all that is needed for the most perfect virtue. [In the next sentence, 'science' is used in its early modern sense of 'rigorously disciplined, deductively = "demonstratively" established and organized body of knowledge'.] Virtue, according to Plato, might be considered as a kind of science; and he thought that anyone will act rightly if he can see clearly and demonstratively what is right and what is wrong. Passion might make us act contrary to doubtful and uncertain opinions but not contrary to plain and evident judgments. Aristotle disagreed; he held that no conviction of the understanding can get the better of ingrained habits, and that good morals arise not from knowledge but from action.

(3) According to Zeno, the founder of the Stoic doctrine, every animal is recommended by nature to its own care and is endowed with a drive of self-love so that it can try to survive and to keep itself as healthy as it possibly can. (See Cicero, *De Finibus* III; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*.) The self-love of man takes in •his body and all its organs and •his mind and all its faculties and powers; it wants the preservation and maintenance of *all* of these in their best and most perfect condition. Whatever tends to support •this state of affairs is pointed out to him by nature as fit to be chosen; and whatever tends to destroy •it is pointed out as fit to be rejected. Thus

health, strength, agility and ease of body,  
as well as physical conveniences that could promote these—  
wealth, power, honours, the respect and esteem of  
those we live with

—are naturally pointed out to us as *eligible*, i.e. as things that it is better to have than to lack. And on the other side,  
sickness, infirmity, awkwardness of movement, bodily  
pain

as well as all the physical inconveniences that tend to bring these on—

poverty, lack of authority, the contempt or hatred of  
those we live with

—are similarly pointed out to us as things to be shunned and avoided. Within each of these two contrasting classes of states there are value orderings. Thus, health seems clearly preferable to strength, and strength to agility; reputation to power, and power to riches. And in the second class of states, sickness is worse than awkwardness of movement, disgrace is worse than poverty, and poverty is worse than lack of power. Virtue and the propriety of conduct consist making our choices in ways that conform to these natural value-orderings. . . .

Up to here, the Stoic idea of propriety and virtue is not different from that of Aristotle and the ancient Aristotelians. The next paragraph is a statement of the Stoics' views, not of mine.

Among the basic items that nature has recommended to us as eligible is the prosperity of our family, of our relatives, of our friends, of our country, of mankind, and of the universe in general. Nature has also taught us that because the prosperity of •two is preferable to the prosperity of •one, the prosperity of •many or of •all must be infinitely more preferable still. Each of us is only *one*; so when our prosperity was inconsistent with that of the whole or of any considerable part of the whole, we ought to choose to give way to what is so vastly preferable. All the events in this world are directed by the providence of a wise, powerful, and good God; so we can be sure that whatever happens tends

to the prosperity and perfection of the whole. So if we are ever poor, sick, or in any other distress, we should first of all do our best—as far as justice and our duty to others will allow—to rescue ourselves from this disagreeable state of affairs. But if that turns out to be impossible, we ought to rest satisfied that the order and perfection of the universe requires that we should in the meantime continue in this situation. And because the prosperity of the whole should appear even to us as preferable to such an insignificant part as ourselves, we should at each moment *like* the state we are in, whatever it is—that’s what is needed if we are to maintain the complete propriety of sentiment and conduct that constitutes the perfection of our nature. Of course if an opportunity to escape from our poverty, sickness, or whatever presents itself, it’s our duty to take it. In that case, it will be evident that the order of the universe no longer requires us to continue in that state, and the great Director of the world has plainly called on us to leave it, by clearly pointing out how to do it. Similarly with the adversity of our relatives, our friends, our country. If we can, without violating any more sacred obligation, •prevent or •put an end to their calamity, it is undoubtedly our duty to do so. The propriety of action, i.e. the rule that Jupiter has given us for the direction of our conduct, evidently requires this of us. But if it’s entirely out of our power to do •either, we ought to regard this outcome as the most fortunate that could possibly have happened; because we can be sure that it tends most to the prosperity and order of the whole, which was what we ourselves will most desire if we are wise and equitable. . . .

Epictetus wrote this:

‘In what sense are some things said to be •according to **our** nature, and others to be •contrary to it? It is in the sense in which we consider **ourselves** as

separated and detached from everything else. Here is an analogue of the point I am making:.

When you consider your right foot as separated and detached, you can say that it’s according to the nature of the foot to be always clean. But if you consider it as a •functioning• foot and not as detached from the rest of the body, it’s fitting for it sometimes to trample in the dirt, sometimes to tread on thorns, perhaps even to be amputated for the sake of the whole body; and if those things can’t happen to it, it is no longer a *foot*. Now, apply that to how we think about ourselves. What are you? A man. If you consider yourself as separated and detached from the rest of the universe, it is according to your nature to live to old age, and to be rich and healthy. But if you consider yourself as a *man* and as a part of a whole •universe•, the needs of that universe may make it fitting for you sometimes to be sick, sometimes to suffer the inconvenience of a sea voyage, sometimes to be in want—and perhaps eventually to die before your time. Why, then, do you complain? Don’t you know that by this kind of complaint you stop being a man?, just as the insistence on the foot’s cleanliness stops it from being a foot?’

[Smith devotes a long further paragraph to a more detailed statement of the Stoic’s view that whatever happens to him is a matter for rejoicing because it must be what God wanted to happen. In a paragraph after that, he makes the point that on this Stoic view there is almost no basis for a good man to prefer any course of events to any other. Continuing:] The propriety or impropriety of his projects might be of great consequence to him, but their success or failure couldn’t matter to him at all. If he preferred some outcomes to others, if he chose some states of affairs x and rejected others y, it

was not because he regarded x as in any way intrinsically better than y, or thought that x would make him happier than y would; it would be simply because the propriety of action, the rule that the Gods had given him for the direction of his conduct, required him to choose x and reject y. All his affections were absorbed and swallowed up in two great affections; **(a)** for the discharge of his own duty, and **(b)** for the greatest possible happiness of all rational and sentient beings. For **(b)** he relied with perfect confidence on the wisdom and power of the great Superintendent of the universe. His only anxiety was about satisfying affection **(a)**—not about the outcome but about the propriety of his own endeavours. . . .

[Now Smith offers three book-pages of development of the idea that for a good Stoic—one whose passions are under control and whose only concern is to act rightly—it will be ‘easy’ to do the right thing in all situations: whether in prosperity or in adversity, all he has to do is to thank Jupiter for having treated him in the way He did. Smith speaks (on the Stoic’s behalf) of the ‘exalted delight’ a good man has in facing hard times and never acting wrongly. He moves smoothly on from this to a paragraph leading to a long discussion of suicide:]

The Stoics seem to have regarded human life as a game of great skill in which there was also an element of chance (or what the man in the street takes to be chance). In such games the stake is commonly a trifle, and the whole pleasure of the game arises from playing well, fairly, and skillfully. If in such a game a good player has bad luck and happens to lose, he should be cheerful about this, not seriously sad. He has made no mistakes, has done nothing that he ought to be ashamed of; and he has enjoyed the whole pleasure of the game. And on the other hand if by chance a bad player happens to win, that success can’t give him much

satisfaction. He is humiliated by the memory of all the mistakes he has made. Even during the play he is cut off from much of the pleasure that the game can give by his constant doubts—unpleasant *frightened* doubts—about whether his plays are going to succeed, and his repeated embarrassment at seeing that he has played badly. The Stoic view is that human life, with all the advantages that can possibly accompany it, should be seen as a mere two-penny stake—something too insignificant to warrant any anxious concern. . . .

The Stoics said that human life itself, as well as every good or bad thing that can accompany it, can properly be chosen and can properly be rejected, depending on the circumstances. If your actual situation involves more circumstances that are agreeable to nature [Smith’s phrase] than ones that are contrary to it—more circumstances that are objects of choice than of rejection—then •*life* is the proper object of your choice; if you are to behave rightly, you should remain in •it. But if your actual situation involves, with no likelihood of improvement, more circumstances that are contrary to nature than ones agreeable to it—more circumstances that are objects of rejection than of choice—then if you are wise you’ll see •*life* itself as an object of rejection. You won’t merely be free to move out of •it; the propriety of conduct, the rule the Gods have given you for the direction of your conduct, *require* you to do so. . . . If your situation is on the whole disagreeable, . . . said the Stoics, by all means get out of it. But do this without, repining, murmuring or complaining. Stay calm, contented, rejoicing, thanking the gods •who have generously opened the safe and quiet harbour of death, always ready to let us in out of the stormy ocean of human life; •who have prepared this. . . .great asylum. . . .that is beyond the reach of human rage and injustice, and is large enough to contain all those who want to retire to it and all

those who don't—an asylum that deprives everyone of every pretence of complaining, or even of imagining that there can be evils in human life apart from ones that a man may suffer through his own folly and weakness.

The Stoics, in the few fragments of their philosophy that have come down to us, sometimes seem to imply that it would be all right for someone to end his life just because it had displeased him in some minor way. . . . But that is misleading: they really held that the question 'Shall I leave my life, or remain in it?' is important, and has to be seriously deliberated. We ought never to leave our life (they held) until we are clearly called on to do so by the superintending Power that gave us our life in the first place. But they thought one might be *called on to do so* before one had reached old age and the end of the normal span of human life. Whenever the superintending Power has managed things in such a way that our condition in life is, on the whole, something it is right to reject rather than to choose, *then* the great rule of conduct that he has given us requires us to leave our life. That is when we might be said to hear the awful and benevolent voice of that divine Being calling on us to do so.

That's why the Stoics thought that it might be the duty of a wise man to move out of life though he was perfectly happy, and the duty of a weak man to remain in it though he was inevitably miserable. [Smith's explanation of this can be put more briefly than he does. The wise man's life might be going badly enough to be 'a proper object of rejection' although he was wise enough to be perfectly happy because the universe was unrolling as it should; the weak man's life might be going well enough to make it wrong for him to reject it, although he wasn't smart enough to avail himself of his opportunities and was therefore unhappy with a life that was mainly going well for him. Smith supports this with a reference to Cicero's *De Finibus* III.]

[Then two book-pages on the historical background of the Stoic doctrine. Stoicism flourished, Smith says, at a time when the Greek city-states were at war with one another; the war was extraordinarily cruel and destructive, and most of the states were too small to offer their citizens much security. In this context, Stoicism provided Greek 'patriots and heroes' with something that could support them if they eventually had to face slavery, torture, or death. Smith compares this with the 'death-song' that an 'American savage' prepared in advance as something he could defiantly sing while being tortured to death. The philosophies of Plato and Aristotle also offered 'a death-song that the Greek patriots and heroes might use on the proper occasions', but Smith says that 'the Stoics had prepared by far the most animated and spirited song'. Writing about the ancient Greek philosophers generally, and not just the Stoics, Smith says memorably:] The few fragments that have come down to us of what the ancient philosophers had written on these subjects constitute one of the most instructive remains of antiquity, and also one of the most interesting. The spirit and manliness of their doctrines make a wonderful contrast with the desponding, plaintive, and whining tone of some modern systems. . . .

[Smith remarks at length that suicide 'seems never to have been common among the Greeks' and that it 'appears to have been much more prevalent among the proud Romans than it ever was among the lively, ingenious, and accommodating Greeks'. He discusses some individual Greek cases, and questions the reliability of the reports. In the time of the Roman emperors, he says, 'this method of dying seems to have been for a long time perfectly fashionable'—an exercise of vanity and exhibitionism!]

The push towards suicide, the impulse that offers to teach us that the violent action of taking one's own life

ought sometimes to be applauded and approved, seems to be purely something that philosophy has produced. When Nature is sound and healthy she never seems to prompt us to suicide. It's true that there is a species of melancholy (a disease to which human nature. . . is unhappily subject) that seems to be accompanied with what one might call an irresistible desire for self-destruction. This disease has often driven its wretched victims to this fatal extreme—often when their external circumstances were highly prosperous, and sometimes in defiance of serious and deeply ingrained sentiments of religion. People who perish in this miserable way are proper objects not of censure but of pity. To try to punish them, when they are beyond the reach of all human punishment, is as unjust as it is absurd. . . . Nature, when sound and healthy, prompts us to •avoid distress on all occasions, and on many occasions to •defend ourselves against it, even at the risk—or indeed the certainty—of dying in the attempt. But when we haven't been able to defend ourselves from distress but haven't died trying, no natural impulse—no regard for the approval of the imagined impartial spectator, i.e. for the judgment of the man within the breast—seems to call on us to escape from distress by destroying ourselves. When we are driven to decide on suicide, what drives us is only our awareness of our own weakness, of our own inability to bear the calamity in a properly manly and firm manner. . . .

The two doctrines on which the entire fabric of Stoical morality is based are these:

- (i) disregard for the difference between life and death, and
- (ii) complete submission to the order of Providence, complete contentment with every outcome that the current of human affairs could possibly cast up.

The independent and spirited (though often harsh) Epictetus

can be seen as the great apostle of (i), and the mild, humane, benevolent Antoninus is the great apostle of (ii).

(i) After a life with many vicissitudes, Epictetus was banished from Rome and Athens, and lived in exile knowing that at any moment he could receive a death sentence from the tyrannical emperor who had banished him. His way of preserving his tranquillity was to develop in his mind a strong sense that human life is insignificant. In his writings he never exults so much (and so his eloquence is never so animated) as when he is representing the futility and nothingness of all life's pleasures and all its pains.

(ii) The good-natured Emperor Antoninus (known in philosophy as Marcus Aurelius) was the absolute ruler of the whole civilized world, and certainly had no special reason to complain about the share of good things the world had given him. But he delights in expressing his contentment with the ordinary course of things, pointing out beauties even in things where ordinary observers are not apt to see any. There is a propriety and even an engaging grace, he observes, in old age as well as in youth; and the weakness and decrepitude of age are as suitable to nature as is youth's bloom and vigour. And it's just as proper for old age to end in death as it is for childhood to end in youth and for youth to end in manhood. In another place he writes this:

'A physician may order some man to ride on horseback, or to have cold baths, or to walk barefooted; and we ought to see Nature, the great director and physician of the universe, as ordering that some man shall have a disease, or have a limb amputated, or suffer the loss of a child. From the prescriptions of ordinary physicians the patient swallows many a bitter dose of medicine, and undergoes many painful operations, gladly submitting to all this in the hope—and that's all it is: *hope*—that health may be the result. Well, the

patient can in the same way hope that the harshest prescriptions of the great Physician of nature will in the same way contribute to his own health, his own final prosperity and happiness; and he can be quite sure that they don't merely •contribute but •are indispensably necessary to the health, prosperity and happiness of the universe, to the furtherance and advancement of Jupiter's great plan. If they weren't, the universe would never have produced them; its all-wise Architect and Director wouldn't have allowed them to happen. The parts of the universe are exactly fitted together, and all contribute to composing one immense and connected system; so every part, even the most insignificant parts, of the sequence of events is an *essential* part of that great chain of causes and effects that never began and will never end—a part that is necessary not only for the universe's prosperity but also for its very survival. Anyone who doesn't cordially embrace whatever happens to him, is sorry that it has happened to him, wishes that it hadn't happened to him, is someone who wants as far as he can to *stop the motion of the universe*, to break that great series of events through which the universal system is continued and preserved, and for some little convenience of his own to disorder and discompose the whole machine of the world. . . .'

From these high-minded doctrines the Stoics, or at least some of them, tried to deduce all the rest of their paradoxical philosophy. ·I shall call attention to just two of their paradoxical doctrines·.

**A:** The wise Stoic tries to enter into the views of the great Superintendent of the universe, and to see things in the light in which that divine Being sees them. But to this great Superintendent all the different events that the

course of his providence may bring forth—from the smallest to the greatest, e.g. from the bursting of a bubble to the bursting of a world, are •equally parts of the great chain that he has predestined from all eternity, are •equally the effects of the same unerring wisdom, of the same universal and boundless benevolence. **So all those different events must be on a par for the Stoic wise man too.** One little department within those events has been assigned to him, and he has some little management and direction of them. In this department he tries to act as properly as he can, and to conduct himself according to the orders that (he thinks) he has been given. But he has no anxious or passionate concern over the success or failure of his own most faithful endeavours. Regarding the little system that has been to some extent committed to his care, it means *nothing* to him whether it has the highest prosperity or is totally destroyed. If that outcome—•prosperity or •destruction—had depended on him, he would have chosen •one and rejected •the other. But it doesn't depend on him; so he trusts to a wisdom greater than his, and is satisfied that the outcome, whatever it may be, is the one he would have devoutly wished for if he had known all the facts about how things are interconnected. Whatever he does under the influence and direction of those principles is equally perfect; snapping his fingers is as meritorious, as worthy of praise and admiration, as laying down his life in the service of his country. . . .

**B:** Just as those who arrive at this state of perfection are equally happy, so all those who fall short of it by any amount, however small, are equally miserable. In the Stoics' view, just as

a man who is only an inch below the surface of the water can't breathe any more than someone who is a hundred yards down,

so also

a man who hasn't *completely* subdued all his private, partial, and selfish passions, who has an earnest desire for *anything* other than universal happiness, who hasn't *completely* emerged from that abyss of misery and disorder that he has been in because of his anxiety for the satisfaction of those private, partial, and selfish passions, can't breathe the free air of liberty and independence, can't enjoy the security and happiness of the wise man, any more than someone who is enormously far from that situation. [Here and in what follows, 'partial' means 'not impartial', or 'biased'.]

Just as all the actions of the wise man are perfect, equally perfect, so all the actions of the man who hasn't arrived at this supreme wisdom are faulty, and, according to some of the Stoics, equally faulty. One truth can't be more true than another, and one falsehood can't be more false than another; and similarly one honourable action can't be more honourable than another, nor can one shameful action be more shameful than another. . . . A man who has killed a cock improperly and without a sufficient reason is morally on a par with a man who has murdered his father.

The first of those two paradoxes seems bad enough, but the second is obviously too absurd to deserve serious consideration. It's so absurd, indeed, that one suspects that it must have been somewhat misunderstood or misrepresented. I can't believe that men such as Zeno or Cleanthes—men whose eloquence was said to be both simple and very uplifting—could be the authors of these two paradoxes of Stoicism, or of most of the others. The others are in general mere impertinent quibbles, which do so little honour to Stoicism that I shall say no more about them. I'm inclined to attribute them to Chrysippus. He was indeed a disciple and follower of Zeno and Cleanthes; but from what we know of him he seems to have been a mere

argumentative pedant, with no taste or elegance of any kind. He may have been the first who put Stoicism into the form of a scholastic or technical system of artificial definitions, divisions, and subdivisions; which may be one the most effective ways of extinguishing whatever good sense there is in a moral or metaphysical doctrine! It is easy to believe that such a man could have construed too literally some of the lively expressions that his masters used in describing the happiness of the man of perfect virtue and the unhappiness of whoever fell short of that character.

[Smith says that the Stoics in general seem to have allowed that there are different degrees of wrongness of behaviour, and he reports some technical terms that were used in this connection by Cicero and Seneca. None of this is needed for what comes next. Having said that the main lines of the moral philosophies of Plato and of Aristotle *are* in line with his own views, Smith now implies that Stoicism *is not*. But he doesn't put it like that. Rather, he says:]

The plan and system that Nature has sketched out for our conduct seems to be altogether different from that of the Stoic philosophy.

The events that immediately affect the little department in which we ourselves have some management and direction—the events that immediately affect ourselves, our friends, our country—are the ones that Nature •makes us care about most and •makes the main causes of our desires and aversions, our hopes and fears, our joys and sorrows. When those passions are too violent (as they are apt to be), Nature has provided a proper remedy and correction. The real or even the imaginary presence of the impartial spectator, the authority of the man within the breast, is always at hand to awe our passions into coming down to a properly moderate level.

If despite our best efforts all the events that can affect our

little department turn out to be unfortunate and disastrous, Nature hasn't left us without consolation. We can get comfort not only from the complete approval of the man within the breast but also from a still nobler and more generous source, namely

a firm reliance on, and a reverential submission to, the benevolent wisdom which directs all the events of human life, and which (we can be sure) would never have allowed those misfortunes to happen if they hadn't been utterly necessary for the good of the whole.

But Nature has *not* prescribed this lofty thought to us as the great business and occupation of our lives! She merely points it out to us as consolation in our misfortunes. The Stoic philosophy prescribes this thought as though turning it over in our minds were the main thing we have to do with our lives. That philosophy teaches us that we are not to care earnestly and deeply about anything except •the good order of our own minds, the propriety of our own choosings and rejections, and •events that concern a department where we don't and shouldn't have any sort of management or direction, namely the department of the great Superintendent of the universe. By

- the perfect passiveness that it prescribes to us, by
- trying not merely to moderate but to eradicate all our private, partial, and selfish affections, by
- not allowing us to have feelings for what happens to ourselves, our friends, our country—not even the sympathetic and reduced passions of the impartial spectator,

*Stoicism* tries to make us entirely indifferent and unconcerned about the success or failure of everything that *Nature* has prescribed to us as the proper business and occupation of our lives.

Although the reasonings of philosophy may confound and perplex the understanding, they can't break down the necessary connection Nature has established between causes and their effects. The causes that naturally arouse our desires and aversions, our hopes and fears, our joys and sorrows, produce their proper and necessary effects on each individual, according to his actual level of sensitivity, and all the reasonings of Stoicism can't stop that. However, the judgments of the man within the breast *might* be considerably affected by those reasonings, and that great inmate might be taught by them to attempt to overawe all our private, partial, and selfish affections into a more or less perfect tranquillity. Directing the judgments of this inmate is the great purpose of all systems of morality. There's no doubt that the Stoic philosophy had great influence on the character and conduct of its followers; and though it might sometimes have incited them to unnecessary violence, its general tendency was to stir them up to perform actions of heroic magnanimity and extensive benevolence.

**(4)** [This follows the treatment of **(3)** Stoicism which began on page 143.] Besides these ancient systems there are some modern ones according to which virtue consists in propriety, i.e. in the suitability of •the affection from which we act to •the cause or object that arouses it. Clark's system places virtue in

- acting according to the relations of things, i.e. in
- regulating our conduct according to whether a proposed action would fit, or be congruous with, certain things or certain relations;

Wollaston's system places virtue in

- acting according to the truth of things, according to their proper nature and essence, i.e. •treating them as what they really are and not as what they are not;

Lord Shaftesbury's system identifies virtue with

- maintaining a proper balance of the affections, allowing no passion to go beyond its proper sphere.

These theories are all more or less inaccurate presentations of the same fundamental idea.

None of those systems gives—none of them even *claims* to give—any precise or distinct criterion that will guide us in discovering or judging this fitness or propriety of affections. The only place where that precise and distinct measure can be found is in the sympathetic feelings of the impartial and well-informed spectator.

Each of those systems gives a description of virtue that is certainly correct as far as it goes. (I should really say 'gives or intends to give'—some of the modern authors don't express themselves very well.) There's no virtue without propriety, and wherever there is propriety some degree of approval is due. But this is an incomplete account of virtue. Propriety is indeed an essential ingredient in every virtuous action, but it's not always the sole ingredient. Beneficent actions have in them another quality which seems to entitle them not only to approval but also to reward. None the systems I have mentioned accounts either easily or sufficiently for •the superior degree of esteem that seems due to such actions, or for •the variety of sentiments that they naturally arouse. And their description of vice is also incomplete in a similar way.

Impropriety is a necessary ingredient in every vicious action, but it isn't always the sole ingredient. Deliberate actions that cause real harm to those we live with are not merely improper but have a special quality of their own that seems to make them deserve not only disapproval but punishment, and to be objects not only of dislike but of resentment and revenge. None of those systems easily and sufficiently accounts for the higher degree of detestation that we feel for such actions. (Also, impropriety doesn't necessarily involve immorality: there is often the highest degree of absurdity and impropriety in actions that are harmless and insignificant.)

## Chapter 2: A system that makes virtue consist in prudence

The most ancient of the systems that make virtue consist in prudence, and of which any considerable record has come down to us, is that of Epicurus. He is said to have borrowed all the leading principles of his philosophy from some of his predecessors, especially Aristippus; but that's what his enemies said, and it's probable that at least his way of applying those principles was altogether his own.

According to Epicurus, bodily pleasure and pain are the sole ultimate objects of natural desire and aversion. (Cicero, *De Finibus* I; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, I.10.) Of course it might sometimes seem that some pleasure should be avoided; but that is only because by enjoying it we would be losing some greater pleasure or incurring some pain that wouldn't have been compensated for by the pleasure that led to it. And similarly for cases where it seems that some pain should be chosen—as a way of avoiding some other worse pain, or of getting a pleasure that would more than make up for the pain. Given those explanations, Epicurus thought it

to be really obvious—and not in need of proof—that bodily pain and pleasure are *always* natural objects of desire and aversion, and that they are the *only* ultimate objects of those passions. According to him, anything else that is either desired or avoided is so because of its tendency to produce one or other of those sensations. •The tendency to procure pleasure makes power and riches desirable, as the contrary tendency to produce pain makes poverty an object of aversion. •Honour and reputation are valued because the esteem and love of those we live with are a great help in getting us pleasure and defending us from pain. •Disgrace and notoriety are to be avoided because the hatred, contempt and resentment of those we lived with destroys all security and lays us wide open to the greatest bodily evils.

[The next two pages expound the views of Epicurus, and that's all they do. Smith resumes speaking for himself in the paragraph starting 'Such is the doctrine of Epicurus. . . ' on page 153.]

All the pleasures and pains of the •mind are ultimately derived from those of the •body. The mind is happy when it thinks of the past pleasures of the body and hopes for more to come; and it is miserable when it thinks of pains that the body has endured, and dreads the same or greater thereafter.

But the pleasures and pains of the mind, though ultimately derived from those of the body, are vastly greater than their originals. The body feels only the sensation of the •present instant, whereas the mind also feels the •past by memory and the •future by anticipation, and consequently suffers and enjoys much more. When we are suffering the greatest bodily pain, we'll always find—if we attend to it—that what chiefly torments us is not the suffering of the present instant but either the agonizing memory of the past or the even more horrible fear of the future. The pain of each instant, considered by itself and cut off from everything that

happens before or after it, is a trifle, not worth attending to. Yet that is all that the body can ever be said to suffer. Similarly, when we enjoy the greatest pleasure we'll always find that the bodily sensation—the sensation of the present instant—creates only a small part of our happiness, and that our enjoyment mainly comes from the cheerful recollection of the past or the still more joyous anticipation of the future, so that the mind always contributes by far the largest share of the entertainment.

Since our happiness and misery mainly depend on the mind, if *this* part of our nature is well disposed, and our thoughts and opinions are as they should be, it doesn't matter much how our body is affected. Though in great bodily pain, we can still enjoy a considerable share of happiness if our reason and judgment keep the upper hand. We can entertain ourselves with memories of past pleasures and hopes for future ones; and we can soften the severity of our pains by bearing in mind what it is that at this moment we *have to* suffer. Thinking about this can lessen our suffering in any of four ways by leading us to ponder four thoughts. **(1)** All I am compelled to suffer is merely the bodily sensation, the pain of the present instant, and that can't be great. **(2)** Any agony that I suffer from the fear that my pain will continue is an effect of an opinion of my mind, and I can correct that by having sentiments that are more correct. **(3)** If my pains are violent they probably won't last long; and if they go on for long they will probably be moderate, and will be interrupted from time to time. **(4)** Death is always available to me as an option; it would put an end to all sensation, whether of pain or of pleasure, and can't be regarded as an evil. When we exist, death doesn't; and when death exists, we don't; so death can't matter to us.

If the actual sensation of positive pain is, in itself, •so little to be feared, the sensation of pleasure is •still less to

be desired. The sensation of pleasure is naturally much less forceful [Smith: 'pungent'] than that of pain; so if pain can take so little from the happiness of a well-disposed mind, pleasure could add hardly anything to it. When the body is free from pain and the mind from fear and anxiety, the added sensation of bodily pleasure can't matter much; it might diversify someone's mental content but can't properly be said to increase the happiness of his situation.

Thus, the most perfect state of human nature, the most complete happiness that man is capable of enjoying, is *bodily ease and security or tranquillity of mind*. To obtain this great end of natural desire is the sole object of all the virtues, which are desirable not on their own account but because of their tendency to bring about this situation of ease and tranquillity.

Take the case of **prudence**. It is the source and energiser of all the virtues, but it isn't desirable on its own account. That careful and laborious and circumspect state of mind—always on the watch for even the most distant consequences of every action—can't be pleasant or agreeable for its own sake. What makes it valuable is its tendency to procure the greatest goods and to keep off the greatest evils.

Similarly with **temperance**—curbing and restraining our natural passions for enjoyment, which is the job of temperance, can't ever be desirable for its own sake. The whole value of this virtue arises from its utility, from its enabling us to postpone the present enjoyment for the sake of a greater to come, or to avoid a greater pain that might ensue from it. Temperance, in short, is nothing but prudence with regard to pleasure.

The situations that **fortitude** would often lead us into—keeping hard at work, enduring pain, risking danger or death—are surely even further from being objects of natural desire. They are chosen only to avoid greater evils. We

submitted to hard work in order to avoid the greater shame and pain of poverty, and we risk danger and death in defence of our liberty and property, which are means and instruments of pleasure and happiness, or in defence of our country, the safety of which necessarily includes our own safety. Fortitude enables us to do all this cheerfully, as the best that is possible in our present situation; it's really just prudence—good judgment and presence of mind in properly appreciating pain, labour, and danger, always choosing the less in order to avoid the greater.

It is the same case with **justice**. Abstaining from taking something that belongs to someone else isn't desirable on its own account: it's not certain that it would be *better for you* if I kept this item of mine than that you should possess it. But you oughtn't to take any of my belongings from me because if you do you'll provoke the resentment and indignation of mankind. If that happens, the security and tranquillity of your mind will be destroyed. You'll be filled with fear and confusion by the thought of the punishment that you will imagine men are always ready to inflict on you. . . . The other sort of justice that consists in giving good help to various people according to their relations to us—as neighbours, kinsmen, friends, benefactors, superiors, or equals—is recommended by the same reasons. Acting properly in all these different relations brings us the esteem and love of those we live with, and doing otherwise arouses their contempt and hatred. By the one we naturally secure, and by the other we necessarily endanger, our own ease and tranquillity, which are the great and ultimate objects of all our desires. So the whole virtue of justice—the most important of all the virtues—is no more than discreet and prudent conduct with regard to our neighbours.

Such is the doctrine of Epicurus concerning the nature of virtue. It may seem extraordinary that this philosopher,

who was said to be personally very likeable, should have overlooked the fact that

- whatever those virtues (or the contrary vices) tend to produce in the way of bodily ease and security, the sentiments they naturally arouse in others are objects of a much more passionate desire (or aversion) than all their other consequences; that
- every well-disposed mind attaches more value to being likeable, being respectable, being a proper object of esteem, than to all the ease and security that may *come from* such love, respect, and esteem; that
- being odious, being contemptible, being a proper object of indignation, is more dreadful than any bodily suffering that can *come from* such hatred, contempt, or indignation;

and that consequently our desire to be virtuous and our aversion to being vicious can't arise from any concern for the bodily effects that either virtue or vice is likely to produce.

There's no doubt that this system is utterly inconsistent with the one I have been trying to establish. But it is easy enough to see what way of looking at things gave Epicurus's system its plausibility. The Author of nature has wisely arranged things so that, even in this life, virtue is ordinarily. . . .the surest and readiest means of obtaining both safety and advantage. Our success or failure in our projects must depend largely on whether people commonly have a good or a bad opinion of us, and on whether those we live with are generally disposed to help us or oppose us. But the best, surest, easiest, most readily available way to get people to think well of us is to *deserve* their good opinion, to be proper objects of their approval. . . . So the practice of virtue is in general very advantageous to our interests, and the practice of vice is contrary to our interests; and these facts undoubtedly stamp an *additional* beauty and propriety

on virtue and a *new* ugliness and impropriety on vice. In this way temperance, magnanimity, justice, and beneficence come to be approved of not only for what they essentially *are* but also for their role as very real prudence. And similarly, the contrary vices of intemperance, pusillanimity, injustice, and either malevolence or sordid selfishness come to be disapproved of not only for what they essentially are but also for their role as short-sighted folly and weakness. It seems that when Epicurus considered any virtue he attended only to this kind of propriety. It's the one that is most apt to occur to those who are trying to persuade others to behave well. When someone's conduct (and also perhaps things he says) make it clear that the natural beauty of virtue isn't likely to have much effect on him, how *can* he be moved in the direction of better behaviour except by showing him the folly of his conduct, and how much he himself is likely eventually to suffer by it?

By reducing all the •different virtues to this •one species of propriety, Epicurus did something that comes naturally to all men but is especially beloved of philosophers as a way of displaying their ingenuity! I am talking about the practice of explaining all appearances in terms of as few causes or sources as possible. And it's clear that he was taking this even further when he equated all the primary objects of natural desire and aversion with bodily pleasures and pains. This great patron of atomism, who so enjoyed deducing •all the powers and qualities of bodies from •the most obvious and familiar of them—namely, the shapes, motions, and arrangements of the small parts of matter—no doubt felt a similar satisfaction when he explained •all the sentiments and passions of the mind in terms of •those that are most obvious and familiar.

The system of Epicurus agrees with those of Plato, Aristotle, and Zeno, in making virtue consist in acting in the most

suitable manner to obtain the primary objects of natural desire. It differs from all of them in two other respects—its account of what the primary objects of natural desire *are*, and its account of the excellence of virtue, i.e. of why virtue ought to be esteemed.

According to Epicurus the primary objects of natural desire are bodily pleasure and pain, and that's all; whereas the other three philosophers held that many other objects are ultimately desirable for their own sakes—e.g. knowledge, and happiness for our relatives, our friends, and our country.

Also, according to Epicurus virtue doesn't deserve to be pursued for its own sake, and isn't one of the ultimate objects of natural appetite. He held that virtue is something to be chosen only because of its tendency to prevent pain and to procure ease and pleasure. In the opinion of the other three philosophers, on the other hand, virtue is desirable not merely •as a means for procuring the other primary objects of natural desire but •as something that is in itself more valuable than all of them. Because man is born for action, they held, his happiness must consist not merely in the agreeableness of his passive sensations but also in the propriety of his active efforts.

### **Chapter 3: Systems that make virtue consist in benevolence**

The system that makes virtue consist in benevolence is of great antiquity, though I don't think it is as old as any of the ones I have been discussing. It seems to have been the doctrine of the greater part of those philosophers who, in the time of Augustus and shortly thereafter, called themselves 'Eclectics' and claimed to be following mainly the opinions of Plato and Pythagoras—which is why they are often called 'later Platonists'.

In the divine nature, according to these authors, benevolence or love is the sole driver of action, and directs the exercise of all the other attributes. God employed his •wisdom in finding out the means for bringing about the ends that his goodness suggested, and he exercised his infinite •power in bringing them about. But •benevolence was the supreme and governing attribute, and the other attributes were subservient to it. The ultimate source of the whole excellence. . . of God's operations is his benevolence. The whole perfection and virtue of the human mind consists in its •having some resemblance to, some share in, the perfections of God, and therefore in its •being filled with the same drive of benevolence and love that influences all the actions of the Deity. The only actions of men that were truly praiseworthy, or could claim any merit in God's sight, are ones that flowed from benevolence. It is only by actions of charity and love that we can suitably imitate the conduct of God, expressing our humble and devout admiration of his infinite perfections. Only by fostering in our own minds the divine drive towards benevolence can we make our own affections resemble more closely God's holy attributes, thereby becoming more proper objects of his love and esteem; until at last we arrive at the state that this philosophy is trying to get us to, namely immediate converse and communication with God.

This system was greatly admired by many ancient fathers of the Christian church, and after the Reformation it was adopted by several ·protestant· divines—eminently pious and learned men, *likeable* men—especially Ralph Cudworth, Henry More, and John Smith of Cambridge. But there can be no doubt that of all this system's patrons, ancient or modern, the late Francis Hutcheson was incomparably the most acute, the clearest, the most philosophical, and—the most important point—the soberest and most judicious. [Hutcheson died, aged 52, a dozen years before Smith wrote this.]

Many aspects of human nature support the idea that virtue consists in benevolence. I have pointed out that proper benevolence

- is the most graceful and agreeable of all the affections, that
- it is recommended to us by a double sympathy, that
- because it necessarily tends to do good, it is a proper object of gratitude and reward,

and that for all these reasons

- it appears to our natural sentiments to have a higher merit than any other virtue.

I have also remarked that even the excesses [Smith writes 'weaknesses'; evidently a slip] of benevolence are not disagreeable to us, whereas those of every other passion are always extremely disgusting. Everyone loathes excessive malice, excessive selfishness, and excessive resentment; but the most excessive indulgence even of partial friendship is not so offensive. . . .

Just as benevolence gives to the actions it produces a beauty that is superior to all others, so the lack of benevolence—and even more the contrary inclination, malevolence—gives to all its manifestations in behaviour a special ugliness all of its own. Pernicious actions are often punishable simply because they show a lack of sufficient attention to the happiness of our neighbour.

Besides all this, Hutcheson observed that when an action that was supposed to have come from benevolent affections turns out to have had some other motive, our sense of the merit of this action is lessened in proportion to how much influence this motive is believed to have had over the action. (Hutcheson, *Inquiry Concerning Virtue*, sections 1 and 2 [thus Smith's reference; actually, that's the title of a work by Shaftesbury; Smith presumably meant to refer to Hutcheson's *Inquiry into the original of our idea of Virtue*].) If an action supposed to

come from •gratitude turns out to have arisen from •an expectation of some new favour, or if an action supposed to have come from •public spirit turns out to have been motivated by a •hope for reward-money, such a discovery will entirely destroy all notion of merit or praiseworthiness in either of these actions. Thus, the mixture of any selfish motive. . . .lessens or abolishes the merit that the action would otherwise have had, and Hutcheson thought that this made it obvious that virtue must consist in pure and disinterested benevolence alone.

And when an action that is commonly supposed to come from a selfish motive turns out to have arisen from a benevolent one, that greatly enhances our sense of the action's merit. . . . This fact seemed to Hutcheson to be a further confirmation of his thesis that benevolence is the only thing that can make any action virtuous.

And finally he thought that the correctness of his account of virtue is shown by the fact that in all the disputes of casuists [= 'theorists of *applied ethics*'] concerning the rectitude of conduct, the public good is the standard to which they constantly refer, thereby all accepting that whatever tends to promote the happiness of mankind is right and laudable and virtuous, and whatever tends to go against it is wrong, blameworthy, and vicious. In debates about passive obedience and the right of resistance, the sole disagreement among men of sense concerns the answer to this:

When privileges are invaded, which response is likely to bring the greater evils—universal submission or temporary insurrection?

As for *this* question:

Would the upshot that tended most to the happiness of mankind be the morally good one?

—nobody, Hutcheson said, even bothered to ask it!

Since benevolence is the only motive that can make an action virtuous, the greater the benevolence that an action shows the greater is the praise that it deserves.

The actions that aim at the happiness of a great community, because they show a more enlarged benevolence than do actions aiming only at the happiness of a smaller system, are correspondingly more virtuous. So the *most* virtuous of all affections is the one that embraces as its object the happiness of all thinking beings; and the *least* virtuous of the affections that could be called ‘virtuous’ *at all* is the one that aims no further than at the happiness of some one individual—a son, a brother, a friend. [See note about ‘affection’ on page 116.]

The perfection of virtue, ·Hutcheson held·, consists in

- directing all our actions to promote the greatest possible good,
- submitting all inferior affections to the desire for the general happiness of mankind,
- regarding oneself as merely one of the many, whose prosperity is to be pursued no further than is consistent with the prosperity of the whole.

Self-love can never be virtuous in any degree or in any direction, ·Hutcheson said·. When it obstructs the general good, it is vicious. When its only effect is to make the individual take care of his own happiness, it is merely innocent—not deserving of praise or blame. A benevolent action is especially virtuous if it is performed in defiance of some strong motive from self-interest, because that demonstrate the strength and vigour of that person’s benevolent drive.

Hutcheson was so far from allowing self-love ever to be a motive of virtuous actions that, according to him, the merit of a benevolent action is lessened if the person wanted the pleasure of self-approval, the comfortable applause of his own conscience. He saw this as a selfish motive which, so

far as it contributed to any action, showed the weakness ·in that person at that time· of the pure and disinterested benevolence that is the only thing that can make a human action virtuous. Yet in the common judgments of mankind, this concern for the approval of our own minds, far from being considered as reducing the virtue of any action, is looked on as the only motive that deserves the label ‘virtuous’.

Well, that is how virtue is described in this likeable system, a system that has a special tendency •to nourish and support the noblest and most agreeable of all affections—and not only •to stop self-love from acting unjustly but also to some extent •to discourage self-love altogether by implying that it can never reflect any honour on those who are influenced by it.

Some of the other systems I have described don’t sufficiently explain what gives the supreme virtue of benevolence its special excellence, whereas this system of Hutcheson’s seems to have the opposite defect, of not sufficiently explaining why we approve of the inferior virtues of prudence, vigilance, circumspection, temperance, constancy, firmness. The only feature of an affection that this system attends to *at all* is its aim, the beneficent or harmful effects that it tends to produce. Its propriety or impropriety, its suitability and unsuitability to the cause that arouses it, is completely ignored.

Also, a regard for our own private happiness and interest seems often to be a praiseworthy motive for action. It is generally supposed that self-interested motives are what lead us to develop the habits of economy, industry, discretion, attention, and application of thought, and these are taken by everyone to be praiseworthy qualities that deserve everyone’s esteem and approval. It’s true of course that an action that ought to arise from a benevolent affection seems to have its beauty spoiled by an admixture of a selfish motive;

but that isn't because self-love can never be the motive of a virtuous action, but only because in the given case the benevolent motive appears to lack its proper degree of strength and to be altogether unsuitable to its object. The person's character seems to be imperfect, and on the whole to deserve blame rather than praise. When an action for which self-love alone ought to be a sufficient motive has an admixture of benevolence in its motivation, *that* isn't so likely to diminish our sense of the action's propriety or of the virtue of the person who performs it. We're not ready to suspect anyone of being defective in selfishness! . . . But if we really believe, of any man, that if it weren't for a concern for his family and his friends he wouldn't take proper care of his health, his life, or his fortune, . . . that would undoubtedly be a failing, though one of those likeable failings that make a person an object of pity rather than of contempt or hatred. It would somewhat lessen the dignity and worthiness of his character, however. Carelessness and lack of economy are universally disapproved of—not as coming from a lack of benevolence but from a lack proper attention to the objects of self-interest.

Although the standard by which applied-ethics people often decide what is right or wrong in human conduct is whether a proposed action tends to the welfare or to the disorder of society, it doesn't follow that a •concern for society's welfare is the sole virtuous motive for action—merely that in any competition •it ought to outweigh all other motives.

Benevolence may perhaps be God's only action-driver; there are several not improbable arguments that tend to persuade us that it is so. It's hard to conceive what *other* motive can drive the actions of an independent and all-perfect Being who has no need for anything external and whose happiness is complete in himself. But be that as it may, *man* is an imperfect creature whose existence needs to be supported

by many things external to him, and who must often act from many other motives. Think about the affections that ought—by the nature of our being—often to influence our conduct, and ask yourself 'Can such affections *never* appear virtuous or deserve anyone's commendation?' How hard our condition would be if *that* were so!

I have described three systems:

- (1) the ones that place virtue in propriety,
- (2) the ones that place virtue in prudence, and
- (3) the ones that place virtue in benevolence.

Those are the principal accounts that have been given of the nature of virtue. All the other descriptions of virtue that philosophers have presented, however different they may look, are easily reducible to one of those three.

The system that places virtue in •obedience to the will of the Deity can be counted among (2) or among (1). Consider the question 'Why ought we to obey the will of the Deity?' This question would be impious and perfectly absurd if it came from doubt about *whether* we ought to obey him; but there is an acceptable role for the question to play, because it can admit of two different answers. We'll have to say

- (2) we ought to obey the will of the Deity because he is a Being of infinite power who will reward us eternally if we do obey him and punish us eternally if we don't; or
- (1) independently of any concern for our own happiness or for rewards and punishments of any kind, it is *fitting* that a creature should obey its creator, that a limited and imperfect being should submit to one whose perfections are infinite and incomprehensible.

Those are the only two answers that we *conceive* to that question. If (2) is the right answer then virtue consists in prudence, or in the proper pursuit of our own final interest and happiness. . . . If (1) is the right answer, then virtue must consist in propriety. . . .

The system that places virtue in *utility* belongs in **(1)**. According to this system, all the qualities of the mind that are agreeable or advantageous to the person himself or to others are approved of as virtuous, and the contrary qualities disapproved of as vicious. And the agreeableness or utility of any affection depends on its degree, i.e. on how strongly or intensely the person has it. Every affection is useful when it is confined to a certain degree of moderation, and every affection is disadvantageous when it exceeds the proper bounds. According to this system, therefore, virtue consists not in any one affection but in the proper degree of all the affections. The only difference between this and the system I have been working to establish is that it makes utility—rather than sympathy, i.e. the corresponding affection of the spectator—the natural and basic measure of this proper degree.

#### Chapter 4: Licentious systems

All the systems I have presented assume that there is a real and essential distinction between vice and virtue, whatever these qualities may consist in. There is a real and essential difference between **(1)** the propriety and impropriety of any affection, between **(3)** benevolence and any other motive for action, between **(2)** real prudence and shortsighted folly or precipitate rashness. And all of them contribute to encouraging praiseworthy dispositions and discouraging blameworthy ones.

[Smith now gives the three a paragraph each in which the system in question is criticised for not getting the moral balance exactly right. This repeats things he has said already, and is given here just to set the scene for what will come in the next paragraph but one.]

Despite these defects, the general tendency of each of those three systems is to encourage the best and most laudable habits of the human mind; and it would be a good thing for society if mankind in general (or even just the few who claim to live according to some philosophical rule) were to regulate their conduct by the precepts of any one of the three. We may learn from each of them something that is both valuable and peculiar. [Smith goes into details about this, in praise of each of the three, with a special emphasis on Epicurus. Then:]

There is, however, another system that seems to remove entirely the distinction between vice and virtue, so that its tendency is wholly pernicious; I mean the system of Mandeville, presented in his book *The Fable of the Bees; or Private Vices, Public Benefits*. [Mandeville died 26 years before the present work was published.] Although this author's opinions are in almost every respect erroneous, some aspects of human nature, when looked at in a certain way, seem at first sight to favour them. When they are described and exaggerated by Mandeville's lively and humorous though coarse and rustic eloquence, they give his doctrines an air of truth and probability that is apt to impose on the unskillful.

Mandeville regards anything done from a sense of propriety, from a concern for what is commendable and praiseworthy, as being done from a love of praise and commendation—or in his words 'done from vanity'. Man, he observes, is naturally much more interested in his own happiness than in anyone else's, and it is impossible for him ever to prefer—really, in his heart—someone else's prosperity to his own. Whenever he appears to do so, we can be sure that he is deceiving us, and acting from the same selfish motives as he does at all other times. One of the strongest of his selfish passions is vanity—he is always easily flattered and greatly delighted with the applause of those around

him. When he *appears* to sacrifice his own interests to those of his companions, he knows that his conduct will be highly agreeable to their self-love and that they won't fail to express their satisfaction by giving him extravagant praises. He thinks that the pleasure he'll get from this outweighs the interest that he abandons in order to get it. So •his conduct on this occasion is really just as selfish, and arises from just as mean a motive, as his conduct at any other time. He is flattered with the belief that •it is entirely disinterested, and he *flatters himself* with it too; because if this were not supposed, his behaviour wouldn't seem to him or to anyone else to merit any commendation. So all public spirit, all preference of public to private interest, is according to Mandeville a mere cheat and imposition on mankind; and the human virtue that is so much boasted of, and that is the occasion of so much emulation among men, is the mere offspring of pride impregnated by flattery!

Can the most generous and public-spirited actions be regarded as in some sense coming from self-love? I shan't try to answer that now. The answer to it is no help in establishing the reality—or the *non*-reality—of virtue, because self-love can often be a virtuous motive for action. I'll only try to show that **(1)** the desire to do what is honourable and noble, to make ourselves proper objects of esteem and approval, cannot with any propriety be called 'vanity'. Even **(2)** the love of well-grounded fame and reputation, the desire to acquire esteem by what is really estimable, does not deserve that name. **(1)** is the love of virtue, the noblest and best passion in human nature. **(2)** is the love of true glory, a passion that in dignity appears to come just below the love of virtue. [Smith describes the sort of person who *is* guilty of vanity: someone who

- wants praise for qualities that don't deserve as much praise as he wants, or

- cares about fancy clothing and trivial bits of 'elegant' behaviour, or
- wants to be praised for something that *he* didn't do, or
- comes across as 'important' although he isn't, or
- gets himself congratulated on adventures that in fact he didn't have, or
- claims to be the author of something he didn't write;

*that* person really is vain in the proper sense of the word. Also:] **(3)** Someone is rightly said to be guilty of vanity if he •isn't contented with the silent sentiments of esteem and approval, •is fonder of noisy acclamations than of the sentiments themselves, •is never satisfied except when his own praises are ringing in his ears, •tries really hard to get external marks of respect, •is fond of titles, of compliments, of being visited, of being attended, of being taken notice of in public places with the appearance of deference and attention. *This* trivial passion is entirely different from either of the other two; it's a passion of the lowest and least of mankind, just as **(1)** and **(2)** are passions of the noblest and greatest.

But though these three passions—**(1)** the desire to make ourselves proper objects of honour and esteem, i.e. to become honourable and estimable, **(2)** the desire to acquire honour and esteem by really deserving those sentiments, and **(3)** the trivial desire for praise no matter how or why it comes—are widely different; though two are always approved of while the third never fails to be despised; there is a certain remote affinity among them; and that is what the humorous and entertaining eloquence of this lively author has exaggerated and used to deceive his readers. There is an affinity between **(3)** vanity and **(2)** the love of true glory, in that both these passions aim at getting esteem and approval. But they are different in this—**(2)** is a just, reasonable, and equitable passion, while **(3)** is unjust, absurd, and ridiculous. The

man who wants to be esteemed for something that really is estimable wants only what he is justly entitled to—you would be *wronging* him by refusing it. Whereas a man who wants esteem on any other terms is asking for something that he has no just claim to. [Smith adds details about ways in which the **(3)** person is sure to behave badly. Then:]

There is also an affinity between **(1)** the desire to become honourable and estimable and **(2)** the desire for honour and esteem, between the love of virtue and the love of true glory. They are alike in both aiming at being honourable and noble, and also in a respect in which **(2)** the love of true glory resembles **(3)** what is properly called vanity—namely having some reference to the sentiments of others. The man of the greatest magnanimity who **(1)** desires virtue for its own sake and cares least about what mankind actually think of him is still delighted with thoughts of what they should think, with an awareness that though he may be neither honoured nor applauded he is still a proper object of honour and applause. . . . But there is still a great difference between **(1)** and **(2)**. . . . The man **(1)** who acts solely from a concern for what is right and fit to be done, a concern for what is a proper object of esteem and approval even if these sentiments are never bestowed on him, acts from the most sublime and godlike motive that human nature is even capable of conceiving. In contrast with that, the man **(2)** who doesn't just want to •deserve approval but is also anxious to •get it, though he too is praiseworthy in the main, has motives with a greater mixture of human infirmity in them. He risks being humiliated by the ignorance and injustice of mankind, and his happiness is vulnerable to the envy of his rivals and the folly of the public. The happiness of **(1)** the other is altogether secure and independent of fortune, and of the whims of those he lives with. If contempt and hatred are thrown on him by the ignorance of mankind,

he isn't humiliated because he regards this as not really aimed at *him*. Mankind despise and hate him because they have a false notion of his character and conduct. If they knew him better, they *would* esteem and love him. . . . It seldom happens, however, that human nature arrives at *this* degree of firmness. Only weak and worthless people are much delighted with •false glory, and yet by a strange inconsistency •false disgrace is often capable of humiliating those who appear the most resolute and determined.

Mandeville isn't satisfied with representing the trivial motive of vanity as the source of all the actions that are commonly regarded as virtuous. He also tries to point out many other respects in which human virtue is imperfect. In every case, he claims, it falls short of the complete self-denial that it lays claim to, and is commonly a mere concealed indulgence of our passions rather than a victory over them. He treats as gross luxury and sensuality any relation to •pleasure except the most ascetic abstinence from •it. He counts as a luxury anything that goes beyond what is absolutely necessary for the support of human nature, so that there is vice even in the use of a clean shirt, or of a convenient place to live. He doesn't morally distinguish •lawful sexual relations between husband and wife from •harmful •and unlawful• gratification of sexual desire; and he sneers at a 'temperance' and a 'chastity' that can be practised at so cheap a rate, •i.e. the cheap rate of merely being married to your sexual partner•. The ingenious sophistry of his reasoning, is here, as on many other occasions, covered by the ambiguity of language. [Smith explains this at considerable and slightly tangled length. When someone has a disagreeable and offensive degree of the passion *love of sex*, this disturbs and upsets people, which means that they *notice* it and want to have a name for it; the chosen name in English being 'lust'. When someone has this desire in a

degree that *doesn't* upset onlookers, they may completely overlook it, and if they do want to talk about it they give it a name that expresses the fact of its being kept down to a moderate level, the name being 'chastity'. Smith's other example is the love of pleasure, and the words 'luxury' for an extreme degree of this passion and 'temperance' for the fact that someone's love of pleasure is suitably bounded. [That was true of 'luxury' in his day, though not in ours.] Mandeville's trick has been to assume that 'he is temperate' means that he has no love of pleasure, and that 'he is chaste' means that he has no love of sex; and he claims to uncover the scandalous fact that supposedly temperate people do have some love of pleasure, and that supposedly chaste ones have some love of sex. By proceeding in this way, Smith continues:] Mandeville imagines that he has entirely demolished the reality of the virtues of temperance and chastity. . . . But those virtues don't require that one be entirely numb to the objects of the passions they try govern. They aim only at keeping the violence of those passions below the level at which they might harm the individual or disturb or offend society.

The great fallacy of Mandeville's book is its representing any passion that is

- vicious when it occurs with a certain intensity and aims in a certain direction

as though it were

- vicious whenever it occurs with any degree of intensity and whatever direction it aims in.

That's how he goes about treating as *vanity* any passion that involves any reference to the sentiments that other people do have or ought to have; and it's how he arrives at his favourite conclusion, namely that 'private vices are public benefits'. If the love of magnificence, a taste

- for the elegant arts and improvements of human life, for whatever is agreeable in dress, furniture,

architecture, statuary, painting, and music is to be regarded as 'luxury', 'sensuality', and 'showing off', even in those whose are in a position to indulge those passions without harming anyone else, then indeed luxury, sensuality, and showing off *are* indeed public benefits! That's because without the qualities to which Mandeville sees fit to give such nasty names, the arts of refinement would have no encouragement, and would eventually die for lack of employment. The real foundation of this licentious system was a set of popular ascetic doctrines that had been current before Mandeville's time and identified •virtue with •the complete wiping out of all our passions. It was easy for him to prove **(1)** that this entire conquest of all human passions never happened, and **(2)** that if it did occur universally, that would be pernicious to society because it would put an end to all industry and commerce and—in a way—to the whole business of human life. He used **(1)** to give himself the appearance of proving that there is no real virtue, and that what claimed to be virtue was a mere cheat and imposition on mankind; and he used **(2)** to give himself the appearance of proving that •private vices are public benefits because without •them no society could prosper or flourish.

Such is the system of Mandeville, which •was published 45 years ago and• once made so much noise in the world. It may not have given rise to more vice than there would have been without it; but it did at least encourage vice that arose from other causes to appear more boldly and to proclaim the corruptness of its motives with a bold openness that had never been heard of before.

This system. . . could never have imposed on so many people, or given rise to such a general alarm among the friends of better principles, if it hadn't in some respects bordered on the truth. •I am not saying that *no* theory can get widespread acceptance unless it is close to the truth•.

A theory in **natural philosophy** [here = 'science'] may seem plausible and be for a long time generally accepted, without having any basis in nature or any sort of resemblance to the truth. Descartes's 'vortices' were regarded by an ingenious nation, the French, for nearly a century as a satisfactory account of the revolutions of the heavenly bodies. Yet it has been demonstrated to *everyone's* satisfaction that these supposed causes of those wonderful effects not only don't actually exist but are utterly impossible, and that if they did exist they couldn't produce the effects that Descartes ascribed to them. But it's not like that with systems of **moral philosophy**. An author claiming to account for the origin of

our moral sentiments can't deceive us so grossly, or depart so far from all resemblance to the truth as did the Cartesian theory of 'vortices'. When a traveller describes some distant country, he can pass off groundless and absurd fictions as established matters of fact. But when someone offers to inform us of •what is going on in our neighbourhood, and of •the affairs of the parish that we live in, although he may get us to accept many falsehoods (if we don't take the trouble to examine things with our own eyes), the greatest falsehoods that he gets us to accept must have *some* resemblance to the truth, and must even have a considerable mixture of truth in them. . . .

### Section 3: The different systems that have been formed concerning the source of approval

#### Introduction

After the inquiry into the nature of virtue, the next most important question in moral philosophy concerns the source of *approval*—the power or faculty of the mind that makes certain characters agreeable or disagreeable to us, makes us prefer one tenor of conduct to another, calling one 'right' and the other 'wrong', and consider one as an object of approval, honour, and reward and the other as an object of blame, censure, and punishment.

Three accounts have been given of the generator of approval. Some people hold that we approve and disapprove of actions—our own and other people's—purely from **(1)** self-love, i.e. from what we think about their tendency to lead to our own happiness or disadvantage. Others say that **(2)** reason—the faculty by which we distinguish truth from

falsehood—enables us to distinguish what is fit from what is unfit, both in actions and affections. According to yet others, this distinction is wholly an effect of **(3)** immediate sentiment and feeling, arising from the satisfaction or disgust that certain actions or affections produce in us. So there they are, the three different sources that have been assigned for the principle [see note below] of approval: **(1)** self-love, **(2)** reason, **(3)** sentiment.

Before I go on to describe those different systems, I should remark that finding the right answer to this question, though it's very important for moral theory, has no practical significance. The question about the nature of virtue is bound to have some influence on our notions of right and wrong in many particular cases, but the question about the principle of approval can't possibly have any such effect. It's

only from philosophical curiosity that we try to discover what the inner contrivance or mechanism is from which those different notions or sentiments arise. [In the early modern period, the word ‘principle’ was sometimes used with the meaning we have for it, in which a principle is a proposition with a special status; but it was *much more often* used to mean ‘source’ or ‘cause’ or ‘drive’—something entirely non-propositional that brings about some event or state of affairs. In the present version ‘principle’ is usually replaced by one of those other words when it has been used in this early-modern sense—e.g. in the heading of the present Section, where ‘principle’ has been replaced by ‘source’. We have just met an agreeably clear bit of evidence of how the land lies: after saying that his topic is a question about **the principle of approval**, Smith goes straight on to say that it’s an inquiry into the inner **contrivance or mechanism** from which approval arises.]

## Chapter 1: Systems that trace the source of approval back to self-love

Those who explain approval as arising from self-love don’t all account for it in the same manner, and *all* their different systems contain a good deal of confusion and imprecision. According to Hobbes and many of his followers—such as Pufendorf and Mandeville—man is driven to take refuge in society not by any natural love for his own kind but because without the help of others he is incapable of surviving with ease or safety. According to this theory, society becomes *necessary* for a man, and anything that favours the support and welfare of •society he regards as having an indirect tendency to promote •his own interests; and anything that is likely to disturb or destroy •society he regards as to some extent harmful or pernicious to •himself. Virtue is the great support of society, and vice its great disturber. That is why virtue is agreeable to every man and vice is offensive to him; he sees virtue as pointing to the prosperity of the society that

is so necessary for the comfort and security of his existence, and vice as pointing to its ruin and disorder.

As I remarked earlier, there can be no doubt that virtue’s tendency to promote the order of society and vice’s tendency to disturb it reflects a great beauty in virtue and a great ugliness in vice; and I mean that we get this sense of beauty and ugliness when we consider this matter coolly and philosophically—i.e. setting aside the fact that we have a stake in society’s surviving and flourishing. When we think about human society in a certain abstract and philosophical light, it appears like an immense *machine* whose regular and harmonious movements produce countless agreeable effects. As with any other beautiful and noble machine made by men, whatever tends to make its movements smoother and easier will derive a beauty from this effect, and whatever tends to obstruct its movements will displease on that account. So virtue, which is like the fine polish to the wheels of society, necessarily pleases; while vice, like the vile rust that makes the wheels jar and grate on one another, is as necessarily offensive. So this account of the origin of approval and disapproval, to the extent that it derives them from a concern for the order of society, turns into the account that gives beauty to *utility* (I explained this earlier); and *that’s* the source of all the plausibility that this •Hobbes• system has. When those authors

- describe the countless ways in which a cultivated and social life is better than a savage and solitary one,
- go on about how virtue and good order are needed for social life to survive, and
- demonstrate how certain it is that the prevalence of vice and lawlessness tends to bring back the savage life,

the reader is charmed with the novelty and grandeur of the views that they open to him. He now clearly sees a beauty in

virtue and an ugliness in vice that he hadn't noticed before, and is commonly so delighted with the discovery that he doesn't take time to reflect that this political view, having never occurred to him in his life before, can't *possibly* be the source of the approval and disapproval that he has always been accustomed to give to virtue and vice.

When those authors derive from self-love our interest in the welfare of society and the esteem that we therefore give to virtue, they don't mean that when we now applaud the virtue of Cato and detest the villainy of Catiline our sentiments are influenced by any thought of getting benefit from Cato or being harmed by Catiline! . . . The Hobbesian philosophers never imagined that when we applaud Cato and blame Catiline we are influenced by some belief about how the behaviour of those citizens of ancient Rome might cause events that help or harm us *now*. Their view was rather that these moral sentiments of ours are influenced by ·the thought of· the help or harm we might have received if we had lived at that time in that place, or by ·the thought of· help or harm that might still come our way if we encounter characters of the same kinds as Cato and Catiline. So really the idea that those authors were groping for, but were never able to get hold of firmly, was the idea of the indirect *sympathy* that we feel with the gratitude or resentment of those who received the benefit or suffered the damage resulting from such opposite characters. *That* is what they were vaguely gesturing towards when they said that what prompted our applause or indignation was not •the thought of what we had gained or suffered but rather •the conception or imagination of what we might gain or suffer if we were to act in society with such associates.

But there is nothing selfish about sympathy! When I sympathize with your sorrow or your indignation, it may be claimed that my emotion is based on self-love because

it arises from bringing your case home to myself, putting myself in your situation, and in that way getting a sense of what I would feel in those circumstances. But although it's true that sympathy arises from an imaginary change of situations with the person principally concerned, this imaginary change is not supposed to happen to

- me in my own person and character,

but to

- me in the character of the person with whom I sympathize.

When I sympathize with you over the death of your only son, in order to enter into your grief I don't think about

- what I, a person of such-and-such a character and profession, would suffer if I had an only son who died.

What I think about is rather

- what I would suffer if I were really you.

In this thought I don't just switch your •circumstances with mine; I change •persons and •characters. So my grief is not in the least selfish: it is entirely on your account, and not in the least on my own. . . . A man may sympathize with a woman in the labour of child-birth, but he can't possibly conceive *himself*—in his own proper person and character—as suffering her pains. That whole account of human nature, which

- derives all sentiments and affections from self-love, which
- has made so much noise in the world, but which
- appears never yet to have been fully and clearly explained,

seems to me to have arisen from some confused failure to grasp what sympathy is.

## Chapter 2: Systems that make reason the source of approval

It is well known to have been Hobbes's view that a state of nature is a state of war; and that before civil government was set up there could be no safe or peaceable society among men. According to him, therefore, preserving society is supporting civil government, and destroying civil government was the same thing as putting an end to society. But the existence of civil government depends on people's obeying the supreme magistrate [here = 'the ruler']. The moment he loses his authority all government is at an end. So, Hobbes concludes, because 'a desire for' self-preservation teaches men to applaud whatever tends to promote the welfare of society and to blame whatever is likely to harm it, that same desire ought to teach them to applaud all instances of obedience to the civil magistrate and to blame all disobedience and rebellion—it 'ought to, and it 'will if they think and speak consistently. Thus, the ideas of *laudable* and *blameworthy* ought coincide with the ideas of *obedient* and *disobedient*; so the laws of the civil magistrate ought to be regarded as the sole ultimate standards of what is just and unjust, right and wrong.

It was Hobbes's announced intention, in publishing these notions, to bring men's consciences immediately under the civil powers—not the ecclesiastical powers, whose turbulence and ambition he regarded as the principal source of the disorders of society (he had been taught to think this by the example of his own times, 'which covered the entire Cromwellian revolution against Charles I.). This made his doctrine especially offensive to theologians, who accordingly vented their indignation against him with great ferocity and bitterness. It was also offensive to all sound moralists because it supposed that there is no *natural* distinction

between 'right and 'wrong, that 'these could be changed, being dependent on what the civil magistrate *chooses* to command. So Hobbes's account of things was attacked from all directions, and with all sorts of weapons, by sober reason as well as by furious declamation.

In order to refute this odious doctrine it was necessary to prove that in advance of any law or man-made institutions the 'human' mind was *naturally* endowed with a faculty by which it distinguished in certain actions and affections the qualities of right, praiseworthy, and virtuous, and in others those of wrong, blameworthy and vicious.

Cudworth in his *Treatise concerning Eternal and Imutable Morality* rightly said that law couldn't be the original source of those distinctions, 'using the following argument'. Suppose that there is a law: then either

- (1) it is right to obey it and wrong to disobey it, or
- (2) it makes no moral difference whether we obey it or disobey it.

If (2) is correct, then there's a law that obviously couldn't be the source of the distinction between right and wrong; and if (1) is right, then this presupposes that there is a standard for right and wrong independently of this law, a standard in terms of which we can say that obedience to the law squares with the idea of right, and disobedience squares with the idea of wrong.

So the mind has a notion of those distinctions antecedent to all law; and from this it seems to follow ('Cudworth said-) that this notion was derived from reason, which distinguishes right from wrong in the same way that it distinguishes truth from falsehood. There is some truth in this conclusion, though in some ways it is rather hasty. It was easier to accept back then, when the abstract science of human nature was still in its infancy, and the different roles and powers of the different faculties of the human

mind hadn't yet been carefully examined and distinguished from one another. [This could refer to Hume's work; he published his *Treatise* and both *Enquiries* in the 28 years between the publication of that work of Cudworth's and Smith's writing of the present work. (Cudworth's book was first published 43 years after his death.)] When this controversy with the views of Hobbes was being carried on with such warmth and keenness, no-one had thought of any other faculty from which such moral ideas could be supposed to arise. And so at that time it was widely accepted that the essences of virtue and vice consist not in conformity or disagreement of human actions with the law of a superior, but in their conformity or disagreement with reason, which thereby came to be regarded as the original source and driver of approval and disapproval.

That virtue consists in conformity to reason is true *in some respects*, and reason can rightly be considered as *in some sense* the source and driver of approval and disapproval, and of all solid judgments about right and wrong. It is by reason that we discover the general rules of justice by which we ought to regulate our actions; and it is by reason that we form the more vague and indeterminate ideas of what is prudent, or decent, or generous or noble, which we carry around with us, doing our best to model the tenor of our conduct on them [see note on 'tenor' on page 85]. Like *all* general maxims, the general maxims of morality are based on experience and induction. We observe in a variety of particular cases what pleases or displeases our moral faculties, . . . and by induction from this experience we set up the general rules. And induction is always regarded as an operation of reason. So it is right to say that we derive from reason all those general maxims and ideas. This is an important result, because general maxims regulate most of our moral judgments. Those judgments would be extremely uncertain and precarious if they depended entirely

on something as variable as immediate sentiment and feeling, which the different states of health and mood can alter so essentially. Thus, our most solid judgments about right and wrong are regulated by maxims and ideas derived from an induction of reason; so it is correct to say that virtue consists in conformity to reason, and we can go that far with the thesis that reason is the source and driver of approval and disapproval.

But that's as far as we can go; it is altogether absurd and unintelligible to suppose that our first or most basic perceptions of right and wrong can be derived from reason, even in the particular cases on the basis of which we form general moral rules. These first perceptions can't be an object of reason; they must be matters of immediate sense and feeling. (That holds true for *all* experiences on which *any* general rules are based.) We form the general rules of morality by finding in a vast variety of instances that one tenor of conduct constantly pleases in a certain way and that another constantly displeases. But reason can't make any particular object either agreeable or disagreeable to the mind for its own sake. Reason can show that this object is a means to getting something else that is naturally either pleasing or displeasing, and in this way reason can make it either agreeable or disagreeable for the sake of something else. But nothing can be agreeable or disagreeable for its own sake unless it is made to be so by immediate sense and feeling. So if virtue in each particular case necessarily pleases for its own sake, and if vice equally certainly displeases the mind, then what reconciles us to virtue and alienates us from vice can't be reason; it has to be immediate sense and feeling. [Smith now offers a short paragraph in which he seems to lose track of what he wanted to say. Its main point is to liken distinguishing virtue from vice to distinguishing pleasure from pain.]

But because reason can in a certain sense be regarded as the source of approval and disapproval, these sentiments were carelessly regarded as basically flowing from the operations of reason; and that went on for a long time. Hutcheson had the merit of being the first who distinguished with any degree of precision in what respect all moral distinctions may be said to arise from reason, and in what respect they are founded on immediate sense and feeling. In his illustrations of the moral sense he has explained this so fully, and I think so unanswerably, that any remaining controversy about the subject must be due either to inattention to what Hutcheson wrote or to a superstitious attachment to certain forms of expression. . . .

### Chapter 3: Systems that make sentiment the source of approval

Systems that make *sentiment* the source of approval can be divided into two classes.

(1) According to some writers, our approvals express a sentiment of a special kind; we have a particular power of perception that the mind employs when it encounters certain actions or affections. Some of them have an agreeable effect on this faculty, and they are given the labels ‘right’, ‘praiseworthy’, and ‘virtuous’. Others have a disagreeable effect on the faculty, and are labelled ‘wrong’, ‘blameworthy’, and ‘vicious’. These writers regard this sentiment as being of a special nature distinct from every other, and as the effect of a particular power of perception—as distinct from any of the others as the sense of sight is distinct from the sense of hearing—so they give it a name of its own and call it a ‘moral sense’.

(2) According to others, we can account for the business of *approving* without having to suppose any new power of

perception that has never been heard of before. They think that Nature acts here—as everywhere else—with the strictest economy, producing a multitude of effects from a single cause; and that all the effects ascribed to this peculiar faculty of ‘moral sense’ can be explained in terms of *sympathy*, a power that we obviously *do* have and that has always been known and noticed. [In the last paragraph of this chapter Smith briefly deals with (2); the rest of the chapter is all about (1).]

Hutcheson was at great pains to show that the approval is not driven by self-love. [Smith refers to Hutcheson’s *Inquiry concerning Virtue*; for what he probably meant, see note on page 156.] He demonstrated too that it couldn’t arise from any operation of reason. The only remaining possibility, he thought, was that approval is an exercise of a faculty of a special kind that Nature has given to the human mind purely so as to produce this one particular and important effect. With self-love and reason ruled out, it didn’t occur to him that the desired explanation might come from some other *known* faculty of the mind.

He called this supposed new power of perception a moral sense, and thought it to be somewhat analogous to the external senses. Just as the bodies around us, by affecting our external senses in a certain way, appear to possess the different qualities of sound, taste, odour, colour; so the various affections of the human mind, by touching the moral sense in a certain manner, appear to possess the different qualities of likeable and odious, of virtuous and vicious, of right and wrong.

According to this system, the various senses—or powers of perception—from which the human mind derives all its simple ideas are of two kinds: (1) the direct or antecedent senses and (2) the reflex or consequent senses. (1) The direct senses are the faculties through which the mind gets its perceptions of qualities of things that don’t presuppose a

previous perception of any other qualities. Thus sounds and colours are objects of the direct senses. Hearing a sound or seeing a colour doesn't require us to perceive some other quality or object first. **(2)** The reflex or consequent senses are the faculties through which the mind gets perceptions of qualities of things that *do* presuppose a previous perception of some other qualities. For example, harmony and beauty are objects of the reflex senses: to perceive the harmony of a sound or the beauty of a colour we must first perceive the sound or the colour. The moral sense was regarded as a faculty of this kind. According to Hutcheson, the faculty that Locke called 'reflection', from which he derived the simple ideas of the passions and emotions of the human mind, is **(1)** a direct internal sense. And the faculty by which we perceive the beauty or ugliness—the virtue or vice—of those passions and emotions is **(2)** a reflex internal sense.

Hutcheson tried to support this doctrine further by pointing out that it is agreeable to the analogy of nature, because the mind does have a variety of other reflex senses exactly similar to the moral sense. Examples: a sense of beauty and ugliness in external objects; a public sense through which we sympathize with the happiness or misery of our fellow-creatures; a sense of shame and honour; a sense of ridicule.

But despite all the trouble this philosopher put into proving •his 'moral sense' theory,...one of its *admitted* consequences will strike many of us as flatly refuting •it. He accepts that it would be highly absurd to ascribe to any •sense a quality belonging to •objects of that sense. •He is right about this: who ever thought of calling the sense of sight 'black' or 'white', the sense of hearing 'loud' or 'soft', or the sense of tasting 'sweet' or 'bitter'? Well, according to Hutcheson it is equally absurd to say that our moral faculties are 'virtuous' or 'vicious', 'morally good' or

'morally evil'. These are qualities of the objects of those faculties, not of the faculties themselves. Suppose we are confronted by someone who is so absurdly constituted that he approves of cruelty and injustice as the highest virtues, and disapproves of fairness and humaneness as the most pitiful vices. Such a constitution of mind might be regarded as bad for the individual and bad for society, and also as strange, surprising, and unnatural in itself; but—Hutcheson contends—it could not without absurdity be called vicious or morally evil.

But now suppose we see someone shouting with admiration and applause at a barbarous and undeserved execution that some insolent tyrant has ordered—we won't think we are guilty of any great absurdity in saying that this behaviour is vicious and morally evil in the highest degree, although all it expresses are •depraved moral faculties, or •an absurd approval of this dreadful conduct.... In such a case I think we might for a while ignore our sympathy with the victim and feel nothing but horror and detestation at the thought of this dreadful spectator. We would abominate him even more than we would the tyrant who ordered the execution; he might have been goaded on by strong passions of jealousy, fear, and resentment, which would make him more excusable than the spectator. *His* sentiments seem to be entirely without cause or motive, and therefore to be perfectly and completely detestable. There's no perversion of sentiment or affection that our heart would...reject with greater hatred and indignation than one of this kind; and so far from regarding such a constitution of mind as being merely 'strange' or 'unsuitable' and not in any respect vicious or morally evil, we would consider it rather as the last and most dreadful stage of moral depravity.

And on the other side of the ledger, correct moral sentiments naturally appear to be to some extent praiseworthy and morally good. If a man's applause and censure are always precisely suited to the value or unworthiness of the object, he seems to deserve a certain amount of moral approval for that. We admire the delicate precision of his moral sentiments; they provide leadership for our own judgments, and their uncommon and surprising justness arouses our wonder and applause. It's true that we can't always be sure that this person's *conduct* will match up to the precision and accuracy of his *judgments* about the conduct of others. Virtue requires •habit and •firmness of mind, as well as •delicacy of sentiment; and unfortunately the former qualities are sometimes lacking in people who have the latter in the greatest perfection. Still, this disposition of mind, although it may sometimes be accompanied by imperfections, is incompatible with anything grossly criminal and is the best foundation on which to build the superstructure of perfect virtue. There are many men who mean well, and seriously intend to do what they think is their duty, who notwithstanding are disagreeable because of the coarseness of their moral sentiments.

You may want to object:

Although the source of approval isn't based on any power of perception analogous to the external senses, it may still be based on a special sentiment that serves this one particular purpose and no other. Approval and disapproval are •certain feelings or emotions that arise in the mind when it sees or contemplates characters and actions; and just as resentment might be called 'a sense of injuries' and gratitude 'a sense of benefits', so •these feelings can properly be called 'a sense of right and wrong' or 'a moral sense'.

But this account of things, though not open to the same

objections as the previous account, is exposed to •two• others that are equally unanswerable.

(1) Whatever variations any specific kind of emotion may undergo, it still preserves the general features that mark it off as being of that kind; and these general features are always more striking and noticeable than any variation which it may undergo in particular cases. For example: *anger* is an emotion of a specific kind, so that its general features always stand out more clearly than all the variations it undergoes in particular cases. Anger against a •man differs somewhat from anger against a •woman, which differs from anger against a •child. In each of those cases the general passion of anger appears in a different version because of the particular character of its object; you'll easily see this if you *attend* •to what goes on in you when you are angry•. But what predominate in all these cases are the general features of the passion. To distinguish *these* you don't need any precise observation, whereas a delicate attention is needed if one is to discover *their variations*; everyone is aware of the general features, while hardly anyone notices the variations. Well, then, if approval and disapproval were emotions of a particular kind distinct from every other kind—in the way gratitude and resentment are—we would expect that each of them in all the variations it undergoes would still retain the general features that mark it off as an emotion of that particular kind, clear, plain, and easily distinguishable. But that isn't what happens. Attend to what you really feel on different occasions when you approve of something. You'll find that your emotion in one case is often totally different from [Smith's phrase] what it is in another, and that you can't find *any* features that those particular emotional episodes have in common. Your approval of a •tender, delicate, and humane sentiment •in someone else• is quite different from your approval of sentiment that strikes you as •great, daring,

and magnanimous. Your approval of each may be perfect and entire; but you are •softened by one and •elevated by the other, and there's no sort of resemblance between the emotions they arouse in you. This is bound to be the case if my theory of the moral sentiments is true: the emotions of the persons you approve of are different and indeed opposite in those two cases; your approval arises from sympathy with those opposite emotions; so *of course* what you feel on the one occasion can't have any resemblance to what you feel on the other. But this couldn't be right if approval consisted in a special emotion that •is triggered by a view of some sentiment in someone but •has nothing in common with that sentiment. And all this can be re-applied to *disapproval*. Our horror at cruelty has *no* resemblance to our contempt for mean-spiritedness. When we encounter cruelty, the discord we feel between our minds and the mind of cruel person is quite different from the discord we feel between our mind and the mind of someone who is mean-spirited.

(2) I would remind you of my earlier point that as well as approving or disapproving of

•the different passions or affections of the human mind that we encounter,

we also find it natural to approve or disapprove of

•people's approvals and disapprovals.

How can that be so if the theory now under investigation is right? In fact, to the question

•How does it come about that we approve of proper approvals and disapprove of improper approvals?

only one answer can possibly be given. It is this: When •you approve •or disapprove• of •his conduct, your frame of mind coincides with •mine; and so I approve of your approval •or disapproval• and consider it as to some extent morally good. And when •your approval •or disapproval• creates a mis-match between your frame of mind and my own, I

disapprove of •it and consider it as to some extent morally evil. So it must be granted that at least in this one •kind of• case, •where A (dis)approves of B's (dis)approval of C•, what constitutes A's moral (dis)approval is the coincidence or opposition between A's sentiments and B's. And if that's what (dis)approval amounts to in this one •kind of• case, why shouldn't it be what it amounts to in every other? Why imagine a *new* power of perception to account for those sentiments?

*Any* account of approval that makes it depend on a special sentiment distinct from every other is open to the following objection: It is strange that this sentiment, which Providence undoubtedly intended to be the governing force in human nature, should have been overlooked to such an extent that it doesn't have a name in any language! The phrase 'moral sense' is a recent invention and can't yet be considered as part of the English tongue. It was only a few years ago that the word 'approbation' [= 'approval'] was appropriated to mean something of this kind. In propriety of language we approve of whatever is entirely to our satisfaction, the form of a building, the design of a machine, the flavor of a dish of meat. The word 'conscience' doesn't immediately stand for any moral faculty by which we approve or disapprove. Conscience does presuppose the existence of •some such faculty, and the word used properly signifies our awareness that we have acted agreeably or contrary to •its directions. When love, hatred, joy, sorrow, gratitude, resentment—and so many other passions that are all supposed to be governed by force of (dis)approval—have made themselves considerable enough to get labels, isn't it surprising that the sovereign of them all should have been so little noticed that no-one apart from a few philosophers has thought it worthwhile to give it a name? . . . .

[Picking up now from paragraph **(2)** on page 168:] There's another system that tries to account for the origin of our moral sentiments in sympathy, but not in the way that I have been trying to establish. I have already given some account of it in Part IV above. This is a system that places virtue in *utility*, and explains the pleasure with which the spectator surveys the utility of any quality in terms of •sympathy with the happiness of those who get the benefit of it. This is different

from the •sympathy by which we enter into the motives of the benefactor and from the •sympathy by which we go along with the gratitude of the beneficiaries. The causal story here is like the story of what happens when we approve of a well-designed machine. But no machine can be an object of either of those two last mentioned sympathies—sympathy with motives and sympathy with gratitude.

#### Section 4: What different authors have said about the practical rules of morality

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I noted in Part III above [page 93] that the rules of justice are the only rules of morality that are precise and detailed; that the rules of all the other virtues are loose, vague, and indeterminate. And I likened the rules of justice to rules of *grammar*, and those of the other virtues to rules that critics lay down for the achievement of what is sublime and elegant in composition, presenting us with a general idea of the perfection we ought to aim at rather than giving us any certain and infallible directions for acquiring it.

Because the different rules of morality can differ so much in their degrees of precision, authors wanting to collect and digest them into systems have gone about this in two different ways. **(1)** One set has followed through the whole loose method that they were naturally directed to by considering any one species of virtues. **(2)** The other set has universally tried to introduce into their precepts the kind of precision that only some of them are capable of. **(1)** have written like critics, **(2)** like grammarians.

**(1)** The first group include all the ancient moralists, and others. They have contented themselves with describing the different vices and virtues in a general manner, and with pointing out the ugliness and misery of one disposition and the propriety and happiness of the other; they haven't pretended to lay down many precise rules that are to hold good in all particular cases, with no exceptions. What they *have* done are two things. **(a)** They have tried to say, as precisely as language will allow,

•what the sentiment of the heart is on which each specific kind of virtue is founded—what sort of internal feeling or emotion constitutes the essence of friendship, of humaneness, of generosity, of justice, of magnanimity, and of all the other virtues; and •what the sentiment of the heart is in the vices that are the opposites of those virtues.

**(b)** And they have tried to say what is the general way of acting—the ordinary tone and tenor of conduct—to which

each of those sentiments would direct us, i.e. what kind of conduct ordinarily goes with a person's being friendly, or generous, or brave, or just, or humane.

(a) Sketching the sentiment of the heart on which each particular virtue is based requires a pencil that is both delicate and precise, but it's a task that can be carried out with some degree of exactness. Of course it isn't possible to express *all* the variations that each sentiment either does or ought to undergo according to every possible variation of circumstances. The variations are endless, and language lacks names for most of them. Consider for example the sentiment of friendship.

- The feeling of our friendship for an old man differs from what we feel for a young man.
- The feeling of our friendship for an austere man differs from what we feel for someone who has softer and gentler manners.
- The feeling of our friendship for a gentle man differs from what we feel for one who has cheerful vivacity and spirit.
- The feeling of our friendship for a man differs from what we feel for a woman, even when there is no sexual feeling mixed in with it.

What author could list and describe these and all the other infinite varieties that friendship can undergo? Still, the general sentiment of friendship and familiar attachment that is common to them all can be pinned down precisely enough. Although the picture that is drawn of it will always be incomplete, it may provide enough of a likeness to enable us to know the original when we meet with it, and even to distinguish it from other sentiments that are considerably like it, such as good-will, respect, esteem, admiration.

(b) To describe in a general way the way of acting to which each virtue would ordinarily prompt us is even easier.

In fact it is hardly possible to (a) describe the internal sentiment or emotion on which a virtue is based without doing (b) something of this kind. It isn't possible to express in language the invisible features of all the different special forms of a passion as they show themselves **within**. The only way to mark them off from one another is by describing the effects that they produce **without**—facial expression and external behaviour, the resolutions they suggest, the actions they prompt to. That is what led Cicero in Book 1 of his *Offices* to direct us to the *practice* of the four cardinal virtues; and led Aristotle in the practical parts of his *Ethics* to point out to us the different *habits* by which he would have us regulate our behaviour—habit such as those of liberality, magnificence, magnanimity. . . .

Such works present us with nice lively pictures of manners. Their liveliness stirs up our natural love of virtue, and increases our hatred of vice; by the rightness and delicacy of their observations they can help to correct. . . .our natural sentiments concerning the propriety of conduct, . . . helping us to get our behaviour more exactly right, by standards that we might not have thought of without such instruction. This treatment of the rules of morality is the science that is properly called 'Ethics'—a science that •can't be done with great precision (it's like criticism in that respect) but that •is nevertheless highly useful and agreeable. It is more open than any other science to using the ornaments of eloquence, through which it gives even the smallest rules of duty a new importance. Its precepts, thus adorned, can produce noble and lasting impressions on young people, getting them while they are young enough to be flexible. . . . Anything that precept and exhortation [= roughly 'commanding and pleading'] can do to spur us to the practice of virtue is done by this science delivered in this way. [That completes (1), started on page 172.]

(2) The second set of moralists •don't content themselves with characterizing in this general manner the tenor of conduct that they want to recommend to us, but •work to lay down exact and precise rules to govern every detail of our behaviour. This group includes:

- (a) All the casuists [= 'applied-ethics theorists'] of the middle and latter ages of the Christian church, as well as
- (b) All those who, during those times or in the century just past, have written about 'natural jurisprudence', as they call it.

Because justice is the only virtue for which such exact rules can properly be given, it's the one that has had most consideration from both of those sub-groups of writers. But they treat it very differently.

(b) Those who write about the principles of jurisprudence attend only to what the person to whom the obligation is due ought to think he is entitled to get *by force*—what every impartial spectator would approve of him for getting in that way, or what a duly appointed judge or arbiter ought to *require* the other person to allow or do. (a) The casuists attend less to

- what one can properly use force to get from someone than to
- what the person who owes the obligation ought to think himself bound to perform because of a sacred and scrupulous regard for the general rules of justice, and of a conscientious fear of wronging his neighbour or of violating the integrity of his own character.

What jurisprudence is *for* is to prescribe rules for the decisions of judges and arbiters. What casuistry is for is to prescribe rules for the conduct of a good man. If the rules of jurisprudence were perfectly complete, and if we always obeyed them all, what would we then deserve? Nothing but •freedom from external punishment! But if the rules

of casuistry were such as they ought to be, and we always obeyed them all, the exact and scrupulous delicacy of our behaviour would entitle us to •considerable praise.

It can happen that a good man ought to think himself bound by a sacred and conscientious respect for the general rules of justice to do something that it would be utterly unjust to extort from him, or for any judge or arbiter to impose on him by force. A trite example: a traveller is obliged by his fear of death to promise a certain sum of money to a highwayman. Should a promise that is in this manner extorted by unjust force be regarded as obligatory? That question has been much debated.

If we take it merely as a question of jurisprudence, the answer is obvious: it would be absurd to suppose that the highwayman can be entitled to use force to constrain the traveller to keep his promise. Extorting the promise was a crime that deserved severe punishment, and extorting the promise-keeping would only be adding a second crime to the first. . . . It would be a ridiculous absurdity to suppose that a judge ought to enforce the keeping of such promises, or that the magistrate [here = 'the legal system'] ought to allow actions at law concerning them. So if we consider this question as a question in **jurisprudence**, the answer is easy.

But if we understand it rather as a question in **casuistry**, it isn't so easily answered. Consider a good man who has a conscientious regard for the sacred rule of justice commanding that all serious promises be kept: will *he* think himself obliged to keep his promise to the highwayman? There really is a *question* about this. Everyone will agree that

- this good man isn't obliged to care about the disappointment of the wretch who brought him into this situation, that

- no injury is done to the robber ·by the promise's not being kept·, and consequently that
- payment of the promise can't be extorted by force.

·That stops jurisprudence from ruling that the promise should be kept, but casuistry may still have something to say·. It may be the case that

- this good man owes some respect to his own dignity and honour, to the inviolable sacredness of the part of his character that makes him reverence the law of truth and hate everything that smacks of treachery and falsehood.

It's not obvious that this is false; and the casuists are greatly divided about such cases. On one side there are those who unhesitatingly say that no sort of regard is due to any such promise, and that to think otherwise is mere weakness and superstition. Cicero was one of these, among the ancients, and Pufendorf among the moderns. Also, above all, Hutcheson, who in most cases was by no means a loose ·or unduly permissive· casuist. On the other side are some of the ancient fathers of the church (e.g. Augustine) as well as some eminent modern casuists; they judge that all such promises are obligatory.

If we bring the common sentiments of mankind to bear on the question, we get the answer that **some** regard is due even to a promise of this kind, but that it's impossible to determine **how much** by any general rule that will apply to all cases without exception. A man who is quite frank and easy in making promises of this kind, and who violates them quite casually, is not someone we would choose as a friend and companion. A gentleman who promised a highwayman five pounds and didn't pay would incur some blame. But if the promised sum was very large, it might be more doubtful what was the right thing to do. Suppose that keeping the promise would entirely ruin the family of the promiser, or

that the sum was large enough be sufficient for promoting the most useful purposes, *then* it would seem to be in some measure criminal, or at least extremely improper, to put it into such worthless hands merely for the sake of a punctilio [= 'a nit-picking point in morals']. A man who beggared himself, or one who threw away a hundred thousand pounds (even if he could afford that vast sum) so as to keep his word to a thief would appear to the common sense of mankind to be utterly absurd and extravagant. Such profusion would seem inconsistent with his duty—with what he owed both to himself and to others. . . . But it's obviously impossible to lay down any precise rule saying how much respect should be had for such a promise, or what the greatest sum is that could be owing because of it. This would vary according to

—the characters of the persons,

—their circumstances,

—the solemnity of the promise, and

—what in detail happened in the hold-up on the highway.

·Regarding that last item·: If the promiser had been treated with a great deal of the sort of elaborate politeness that is sometimes to be met with in really bad people, the promise would seem to have more force than it would otherwise have had. It may be said in general that

exact propriety requires that all such promises should be kept, except when that would be inconsistent with some other duties that are more sacred, such as •regard for the public interest, •regard for those who should be provided for out of gratitude, natural affection, or respect for the laws of proper beneficence.

But, I repeat, we have no precise rules to determine what actions such motives require or, therefore, to determine when those virtues are inconsistent with keeping such promises.

We should remember, though, that whenever such promises are broken—even if for the most necessary

reasons—that will always bring some degree of dishonour to the person who made them. After they are made, we may be convinced that it would be wrong to keep them, but still there is some fault in having made them in the first place. It is, at least, a departure from the highest and noblest maxims of magnanimity and honour; a brave man ought to die rather than make a promise that it would be foolish to keep and disgraceful to break. For some degree of disgrace always accompanies a situation of this kind. Treachery and falsehood are vices so dangerous, so dreadful, and at the same time so easy to practice and often so safe, that we are more protective concerning them than concerning almost any other. So our imagination attaches the idea of shame to all violations of faith, in every circumstance and in every situation. In this respect they resemble the violations of chastity in the fair sex, a virtue of which (for the same reasons) we are excessively protective; and our sentiments concerning female chastity are not more delicate than our sentiments concerning the breaking of promises. A breach of chastity dishonours the woman irretrievably. No details of the case. . . . can excuse it; no sorrow or repentance can atone for it. We are so hard to satisfy in this respect that even a rape dishonours the victim: in our imagination the innocence of her mind can't wash out the pollution of her body. It is just like that with breaking one's word when it has been solemnly pledged, even if it was to the most worthless of mankind. Fidelity [here = 'promise-keeping'] is such a *necessary* virtue that we see it as being in general due even to those to whom nothing else is due, and whom we think it lawful to kill and destroy. The culprit may plead that he promised only in order to save his life, and that he broke his promise because keeping it would be inconsistent with some other respectable duty; these facts may alleviate his dishonour but they can't entirely wipe it out. He appears

to have been guilty of an action that has some degree of shame inseparably connected with it in the imaginations of men. He has broken a promise that he had solemnly said he would keep; and his character, if not irretrievably stained and polluted, at least has affixed to it a ridicule that it will be difficult to get rid of entirely. No man who had gone through an adventure of this kind would be fond of telling the story!

This example may serve to show how casuistry differs from jurisprudence, even when both are dealing with the obligations of the general rules of justice.

But though this difference is real and essential, though those two sciences have quite different purposes, the sameness of their subject-matter has made them alike—so much so that most authors who announce that they are doing jurisprudence raise various questions of which they answer *some* according to the principles of jurisprudence and *others* according to those of casuistry, without distinguishing them and perhaps without even being aware of this switch whenever it occurs.

But casuistry is by no means confined questions about what would be demanded of us by a conscientious respect for the general rules of justice. It also takes in many other parts of Christian and moral duty. What seems principally to have led to the development of casuistry was the custom of spoken confession, introduced by the Roman Catholic superstition in times of barbarism and ignorance. By that institution everyone's most secret actions and even thoughts that could be suspected of veering away ever so slightly from the rules of Christian purity were to be revealed to the confessor. The confessor told his penitents whether and how they had violated their duty, and what penance they would have to undergo before he could absolve them in the name of the offended Deity.

The consciousness of having done wrong, or even the *suspicion* of it, is a load on every mind; and it is accompanied by anxiety and terror in everyone who isn't hardened by long habits of wickedness. Here as in all other distresses men are naturally eager to unburden themselves of the oppression they feel on their thoughts, by revealing the agony of their mind to someone whose secrecy and discretion they can trust in. The shame they suffer from this acknowledgment is fully compensated for by the lessening of their uneasiness that nearly always comes from the sympathy of their confidant, the confessor. They get relief from the discovery that they are not entirely unworthy of respect; and that however their past conduct may be censured, their present disposition is approved of and may be sufficient to make up for the past, or at least to bring them some degree of esteem from their friend, the confessor. In those times of superstition a numerous and skillfully contriving clergy insinuated themselves into the confidence of almost every private family. [Smith continues at some length describing the priests as cunningly working themselves into the position of accepted moral authorities. Then:] To qualify themselves as confessors thus became a necessary part of the study of churchmen and divines; and that led them to collect what are called 'cases of conscience', difficult and delicate situations where it is hard to decide what is the right thing to do. Such collections, they imagined, might be useful to the directors of consciences and to those who were to be directed; and that is how books of casuistry were started.

The casuists mainly dealt with moral duties of which it is true that

- they can at least to some extent be covered by general rules, and
- the violation of them is naturally followed by some degree of remorse and some fear of punishment.

The institution that gave rise to their works—namely, confession—was designed soothe the terrors of conscience that come with the infringement of such duties. But one can fall short in *some* virtues without any severe moral worries of this kind; no-one applies to his confessor for absolution because he didn't do the most generous, the most friendly, or the most magnanimous thing that could possibly have been done in his circumstances. The rule that is violated in failures of this kind is usually not determinate, and—a second point—is generally of such a kind that although one might be entitled to honour and reward for obeying it, one isn't exposed to positive blame, censure, or punishment if one violates it. The exercise of virtues of that kind seems to have been regarded by the casuists as a sort of work of supererogation, which couldn't be strictly demanded and which therefore didn't have to be discussed by them. ['Supererogation' is still a standard English word, if not a very common one. A supererogatory act is one that goes beyond the call of duty, one that it is praiseworthy to perform and not blameworthy to not-perform.]

The breaches of moral duty that *did* come before the tribunal of the confessor, and on that account came within the scope of the casuists, were chiefly of three kinds.

**(1)** Breaches of the rules of justice. These rules are all explicit, firm, and definite, and violating them naturally brings an awareness of deserving and a fear of suffering punishment from both God and man.

**(2)** Breaches of the rules of chastity. In all the grosser instances these are real breaches of the rules of justice, and no-one can be guilty of them without doing unpardonable harm to someone else. In lesser instances, where the breaches amount only to violations of the exact rules of conduct that ought to be observed in relations between the two sexes, they aren't violations of the rules of justice. Still, they are generally violations of a pretty plain rule, and

they tend, in at least one of the sexes, •to bring disgrace on the person who has been guilty of them and thus to •be accompanied attended in scrupulous people with some degree of shame and remorse.

(3) Breaches of the rules of veracity. Although the violation of truth is often a breach of justice, it isn't always so, which is why such violations can't always expose the person to any external punishment. The vice of ordinary everyday lying, though a miserable meanness, often doesn't harm anyone; and in those cases no-one can claim to have a right of revenge or a right to compensation. But the violation of truth, though not always a breach of justice, is always a breach of a plain rule, and it naturally tends to bring shame on the person who is guilty of it.

·AN ASIDE ON TRUTHFULNESS·

Young children seem to have an instinctive disposition to believe whatever they are told. Nature seems to have judged it necessary for their survival that they should, for a while at least, have complete confidence in the people who entrusted with the care of their childhood and of the earliest and most necessary parts of their education. So they are excessively credulous, and it requires long experience of the falsehood of mankind to reduce them to a reasonable degree of caution and distrust. In adults the degrees of credulity are clearly different. The wisest and most experienced are generally the least credulous. But there's hardly a man alive who isn't more credulous than he ought to be, and who doesn't often believe tales that not only •turn out to be perfectly false but also •could have been spotted as false through a quite small amount of reflection and attention. One's natural disposition is always to believe. Only through acquired wisdom and experience do we learn incredulity, and we don't often learn enough. The wisest and most cautious of us often accepts stories that he himself is afterwards both ashamed and

astonished that he could possibly think of believing.

The man we believe is our leader and director in the matters concerning which we believe what he tells us, and we look up to him with a certain amount of esteem and respect. But just as we move from admiring other people to wanting to be admired ourselves, so also we move from being led and directed by other people to wanting to be leaders and directors ourselves. And just as we can't always be satisfied merely with being admired unless we can persuade ourselves that we are to some extent really worthy of admiration, so also we can't always be satisfied merely with being believed unless we are aware that we are really worthy of belief. Just as the desire for praise and the desire for praiseworthiness are (though closely related) distinct and separate desires, so also the desire to be believed and the desire to be worthy of belief are (though closely related) equally distinct and separate desires.

The desire to be believed—the desire to persuade, lead and direct other people—seems to be one of the strongest of all our natural desires. It may be the instinct on which the faculty of speech is based. . . . No other animal has this faculty, and we can't find in any other animal any desire to lead and direct the judgment and conduct of its fellows. Great ambition—the desire for real superiority, the desire to lead and direct—seems to be exclusive to man; and *speech* is the great instrument of ambition—of real superiority, of leading and directing the judgments and conduct of other people.

It is always humiliating not to be believed, and it is doubly so when we suspect that the reason we aren't believed is that we are regarded as •unworthy of belief and as •capable of seriously and deliberately deceiving. To tell a man that he lies is the gravest of all insults. Yet anyone who seriously and deliberately deceives others *must* be aware that he deserves

this insult, that he doesn't deserve to be believed, and that he is giving up any claim to the sort of trust that he needs if he is to have any sort of ease, comfort, or satisfaction in the society of his equals. A man who had the misfortune to imagine that nobody believed a single word he said would feel himself an outcast from human society, would dread the thought of going into it, or of presenting himself before it; and I think he would probably die of despair. But it is likely that no man ever had good reason to have *this* belief about his situation. The most notorious liar, I'm inclined to think, tells the truth at least twenty times for once that he seriously and deliberately lies; and just as in the most cautious people the disposition to believe is apt to prevail over the disposition to doubt and distrust, so also in those who care least about truth the natural disposition to tell it usually prevails over the disposition to deceive, or in any way to alter or disguise it.

We are humiliated when we happen to deceive other people, even though it was unintentional and a result of having been deceived ourselves. Although this involuntary falsehood is often not a sign of any lack of truthfulness—of any lack of the most perfect love of truth—it is always to some extent a sign of •lack of judgment, of failure of memory, of •improper credulity, of •some degree of impulsiveness and rashness. It always lessens our authority to persuade, and always casts some doubt on our fitness to lead and direct. Still, the man who sometimes misleads because he has made a mistake is very different from the one who is capable of wilfully deceiving. The former may safely be trusted on many occasions, the latter almost never.

Frankness and openness win confidence. We trust the man who seems willing to trust us. We see clearly, we think, the road along which he means to lead us, and we are glad to give ourselves over to his guidance and direction. Reserve

and concealment, on the other hand, call forth *unconfidence*. We're afraid to follow a man who is going *we-don't-know-where*. Also, what makes conversation and society such a pleasure is a certain correspondence of sentiments and opinions, a certain harmony of minds that blend and keep time with one another like musical instruments. But this delightful harmony can't be obtained unless there is a free communication of sentiments and opinions. So we all want to feel how each other is affected, to penetrate into each others' bosoms and observe the sentiments and affections that really exist there. The man who co-operates with us in this natural passion, who invites us into his heart, . . . seems to offer a kind of hospitality that is more delightful than any other. [Smith goes on at rather laborious length about •the pleasures of open-hearted communication, •the dangers of going too far and prying into things that others want to keep private, •the unpleasantness of a person who repels *all* our attempts to get to know him, •the strengths and dangers of being temperamentally reserved and secretive, and •the upsettingness of learning that one has innocently passed along a falsehood. He works a few mentions of the casuists into all this, and eventually returns to them as his main topic, with a quick recapitulation:]

So the chief topics of the writings of the casuists were these:

- (1) the conscientious respect that should be paid to the rules of justice; how far we ought to respect the life and property of our neighbour; the duty of restitution;
- (2) the laws of chastity and modesty, and what constituted the 'sins of concupiscence', as they called them [= 'sins involving an immoderate desire for worldly things'];
- (3) the rules of veracity, and the obligation of oaths, promises, and contracts of all kinds.

The casuists in their works tried to take things that only

- feeling and sentiment can judge of, and to direct them by
- precise rules—tried and failed! How could one ascertain by rules

- the exact point at which in any given case a delicate sense of justice begins to turn into a trivial and weak fussiness of conscience?
- when secrecy and reserve begin to grow into dissimulation?
- how far an agreeable irony can be carried, and at what precise point it begins to degenerate into a detestable lie?
- what is the highest pitch of freedom and ease of behaviour that can be regarded as graceful and becoming, and when does it start to turn into a negligent and thoughtless licentiousness?

With regard to all such matters, what would be right in one case would hardly be exactly right in any other, and what constitutes behaving in a fully satisfactory way varies from case to case because of tiny differences in the situations. Books of casuistry, therefore, are generally as useless as they are commonly tiresome. They couldn't give much help to anyone who consulted them occasionally, even if their decisions were always right, because it is so unlikely that a casuist author will have considered cases *exactly* parallel to the one he is now being consulted about. Someone who is really anxious to do his duty must be weak if he thinks he has much use for works of casuistry; and as for someone who doesn't care much about his duty, the style of those writings makes them unlikely to awaken him to care more. None of them tend to animate us to what is generous and noble. None of them tend to soften us to what is gentle and humane. Many of them, on the contrary, tend rather to teach us to logic-chop with our own consciences, and by their vain subtleties serve to authorize countless evasive

refinements concerning the most essential articles of our duty. The frivolous precision that they tried to introduce into subjects that don't admit of it was almost certain to betray them into those dangerous errors; and at the same time it made their works dry and disagreeable, full of abstruse and metaphysical distinctions, but unable to arouse in the heart any of those emotions that it is the principal use of books of morality to arouse.

[In preparation for this paragraph, recall that Smith has identified three kinds of writings on morality, to which he gives the labels 'ethics', 'casuistry' and 'jurisprudence'.] The two useful parts of moral philosophy, therefore, are Ethics and Jurisprudence; Casuistry ought to be rejected altogether. •The ancient moralists appear to have judged much better than did the mediaeval and modern casuists. When •they treated those same subjects they didn't make a parade of minute exactness, but settled for describing in a general way the sentiments on which justice, modesty, and veracity are founded, and the ordinary ways of acting to which those virtues would commonly prompt us.

[Some ancient philosophers did produce what looks like casuistry, Smith admits; he mentions Book 3 of Cicero's *Offices*. But he says that they weren't attempting any sort of completeness, and were only illustrating situations where there is a question as to whether the ordinary rules of duty should be adhered to.]

Every system of man-made law can be seen as a more or less imperfect attempt at a system of natural jurisprudence, or at an enumeration of the particular rules of justice. Because the violation of •justice is something men will never submit to from one another, the public magistrate [see note on page 44] has to use the power of the commonwealth to enforce the practice of this •virtue. If this were not done, civil society would become a scene of bloodshed and disorder,

with every man getting his own private revenge whenever he fancied he had been harmed. To prevent the confusion that would come with every man's seeking justice for himself, the magistrate in any government that has acquired any considerable authority undertakes to provide justice for everyone, and promises to hear and to redress every complaint of injury. In all well-governed states, as well as judges being appointed to settle the controversies of individuals, rules are laid down to regulate the decisions of those judges; and these rules are generally intended to coincide with the rules of natural justice. Not that they actually always do so. It sometimes happens that the man-made laws of a country are wrenched away from what natural justice would prescribe—sometimes by the so-called 'constitution' of the state, i.e. the interests of the government; and sometimes by the interests of particular groups of men who tyrannize the government. In some countries, the crudeness and barbarism of the people prevent the natural sentiments of justice from reaching the accuracy and precision that they naturally attain to in more civilized nations. Their laws are, like their manners, gross and crude and undistinguishing [Smith's word]. In other countries where the people are civilized enough to sustain a disciplined regular system of jurisprudence, no such system becomes established because the unfortunate structure of their legal system blocks it. In no country do the decisions of man-made law coincide, exactly and in every case, with the rules that the natural sense of justice would dictate. So systems of man-made law, though they deserve the greatest authority, as the records of mankind's sentiments in different ages and nations, can't ever be seen as accurate systems of the rules of natural justice.

One might have expected that lawyers' reasonings about the various imperfections and improvements of the laws of

various countries would give rise to an inquiry into what are the natural rules of justice independently of all man-made institutions. One might have expected that these reasonings would lead the lawyers to aim at establishing a system of *natural jurisprudence* properly so-called, a theory of the general principles that ought to permeate and be the foundation of the laws of all nations. Well, the reasonings of lawyers did produce something of this kind; and everyone who has systematically treated the laws of any particular country has mixed into his work many observations of this sort; but it was late in the world before any such general system was thought of, and before the philosophy of law was addressed on its own and without reference to the particular institutions of any one nation. In none of the ancient moralists, do we find any attempt at a detailed list of the rules of justice. Cicero in his *Offices* and Aristotle in his *Ethics* discuss justice in the same general manner in which they discuss all the other virtues. In the laws of Cicero and Plato, where we might naturally have expected some attempts at a list of the rules of natural equity—rules that ought to be enforced by the man-made laws of every country—there is nothing of this kind. Their laws are laws of policy, not of justice. Grotius seems to have been the first to try to give the world anything like a system of the principles that ought to permeate and be the foundation of the laws of all nations; and his treatise on the laws of war and peace, with all its imperfections, is perhaps the most complete work that has so far been given on this subject. In another work I shall try to give an account of the general principles of law and government and of the different revolutions they have gone through in the different ages and periods of society, not only in relation to justice but also in relation to policy, taxation, and arms, and whatever else is the object of law.