

Comment: *In Defence of Hume and Moore*

The International Theological Commission's recent document on 'the search for universal ethics: a new look at natural law' (of which there are Italian and French versions but as yet no official English text) is unprecedentedly generous in its hospitality towards 'the wisdom traditions and world religions', detecting evidence of our 'common patrimony of moral values' in Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese thought, African religions, Islam, Plato and Aristotle, and then of course in the Bible. It culminates in the Christian Middle Ages.

One of the traditions with which no dialogue is expected is evidently the kind of philosophy that has been practised in English-speaking cultures for the past fifty years. In the late Middle Ages, so the story goes, the nature of the world gradually ceased to provide norms for ethics. With nominalism, voluntarism, the exaltation of subjectivity, freedom as indifference to every natural inclination, culture not 'humanization or transfiguration of nature by spirit' but 'pure and simple negation of nature', and so on, we collapse into 'pure and simple nihilism' (cf §72). The ancient affinity between nature and the human spirit is denied in the 'naturalistic fallacy' denounced by David Hume and then by George Edward Moore (cf §73).

G.E. Moore hated his full name (his wife called him 'Bill'); but was his 'naturalistic fallacy' actually anticipated by Hume? Has Moore's *Principia Ethica* nothing to contribute to a 'search for universal ethics'? After all, Moore's targets are principally Herbert Spencer's then widely discussed thesis that the good is best defined as what has so far reached the highest stage in the evolutionary process, and John Stuart Mill's equally influential claim that the good is what gives most pleasure. Without caricaturing much, Moore's thesis is that the good is what it intrinsically is, unanalyzable into supposedly more elementary natural facts. Admittedly he was also opposed to the claim that good and evil may be analyzed in terms of some metaphysical or supersensible reality, while his resort to some kind of intuition as the basis of our knowledge of good and evil clearly raises another set of questions; but, in the present scientific and hedonistic climate (so to speak), is it clear that Moore's non-natural ethics of the intrinsically good is not worth discussing?

As for Hume — well, much has been written about his throwaway remark that we cannot derive an 'ought' from an 'is' — 'Hume's Law' as it was called in the 1950s at Oxford. Many commentators

believe he meant that value judgments couldn't logically be derived from factual statements. Obviously we are very tempted to see a gap between pure description of the facts (on which we expect to agree) and the evaluation we place on them (where agreement seems unlikely). In context, in the *Treatise of Human Nature* (completed by the time he was 26, mostly at La Flèche, in Anjou, where he enjoyed talking with some of the Jesuits as well as having access to their library), Hume is campaigning at great length against the idea that reason alone is enough to get us going about good and evil. He has Samuel Clarke mostly in mind and thus a conception of reasoning modeled on mathematical deduction. But with philosophers like David Wiggins ('A sensible subjectivism?') and Annette Baier ('Hume, the woman's moral theorist?') it has become possible to return to Hume and discover his emphasis on human nature as a whole — social, emotional, embodied — such that his moral theory can be described as ethical naturalism. Indeed, as M. Jamie Ferreira argued in her marvelous book *Scepticism and Reasonable Doubt: The British Naturalist Tradition in Wilkins, Hume, Reid, and Newman* (1986), far from being the paradigm sceptic of the potted histories of philosophy (as also for Reid and Newman), there is the Hume who famously declared that 'Nature by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determined us to judge as well as to breathe and feel' — which, as he goes on to say, makes the arguments of radical sceptics — 'that fantastic sect' — ridiculous; but it is a declaration which also opens the possibility of exchange with thinkers for whom the ethical is grounded in the natural.

Hume is, of course, a complex thinker. His aim of explaining the principles of human nature in accordance with the methodology of Newtonian physics could not but result in a certain 'scientism', such as Moore sought to eliminate. But then Moore also left too many gaps in his philosophy: if it is by 'intuition' that we know what good and evil are, it was predictable that the next generation would come up with 'emotivism', the 'hurrah-boo' theory of morals and the rest of it. Of course much moral practice as well as philosophical theory, at least in Britain, might be said to approximate to the nihilism that the ITC document flags up. Yet, unless we judge post-Christian secular culture irremediably lacking in even the elements of 'universal ethics', it seems precipitate to exclude all possibility of debate with such influential thinkers as G.E. Moore and David Hume.

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