

# Concerning the Moral Sense

Francis Hutcheson

*A debate raged among Enlightenment thinkers on whether human beings were motivated principally by self-interest or by some feelings of empathy or benevolence to others. If Mandeville was firmly in the former camp, the Scottish minister and professor of moral philosophy Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) was a leader of the latter. In this selection from his *System of Moral Philosophy* (1755), he provides his school its name, “moral sense.”*

There is therefore, as each one by close attention and reflection may convince himself, a natural and immediate determination to approve certain affections, and actions consequent upon them; or a natural sense of immediate excellence in them, not referred to any other quality perceivable by our other senses or by reasoning. When we call this determination a sense or *instinct*, we are not supposing it of that low kind dependent on bodily organs, such as even the brutes have. It may be a constant settled determination in the soul itself, as much as our powers of judging and reasoning. And 'tis pretty plain that *reason* is only a subservient power to our ultimate determinations either of perception or will. The ultimate end is settled by some sense, and some determination of will: by some sense we enjoy happiness, and self-love determines to it without reasoning. Reason can only direct to the means; or compare two ends previously constituted by some other immediate powers.

In other animal-kinds each one has instincts toward its proper action, and has the highest enjoyment in following them, even with toil and some pain. Can we suppose mankind void of such principles? as brutes seem not to reflect on their own temper and actions, or that of others, they may feel no more than present delight in following their impulses. But in men, who can make their own tempers and conduct the objects of reflection, the analogy of nature would make one expect a sense, a relish about them, as well as about other objects. To each of our powers we seem to have a corresponding taste or sense, recommending the proper use of it to the agent, and making him relish or value the like exercise of it by another. This we see as to the powers of voice, of imitation, designing, or machinery, motion, reasoning; there is a sense discerning and recommending the proper exercise of them. It would be anomalous in our structure if we had no relish or taste for powers and actions of yet greater importance; if a species of which each one is naturally capable of very contrary affections toward its fellows, and of consequent actions, each one also requiring a constant intercourse of actions with them, and dependent on them for his subsistence, had not an

immediate relish for such affections and actions as the interest of the system requires. Shall an immediate sense recommend the proper use of the inferior powers, and yet shall we allow no natural relish for that of the superior?

As some others of our immediate perceptive powers are capable of culture and improvement, so is this moral sense, without presupposing any reference to a superior power of reason to which their perceptions are to be referred. We once had pleasure in the simple artless tunes of the vulgar. We indulge ourselves in music; we meet with finer and more complex compositions. In these we find a pleasure much higher, and begin to despise what formerly pleased us. A judge, from the motions of pity, gets many criminals acquitted: we approve this sweet tenderness of heart. But we find that violence and outrages abound; the sober, just, and industrious are plagued, and have no security. A more extensive view of a public interest shows some sorts of pity to occasion more extensive misery, than arises from a strict execution of justice. Pity of itself never appears deformed; but a more extensive affection, a love to society, a zeal to promote general happiness, is a more lovely principle, and the want of this renders a character deformed. This only shows, what we shall presently confirm, that among the several affections approved there are many degrees: some much more lovely than others. 'Tis thus alone we correct any apparent disorders in this *moral faculty*, even as we correct our reason itself. As we improve and correct a low taste for harmony by enuring the ear to finer compositions; a low taste for beauty, by presenting the finer works, which yield an higher pleasure; so we improve our *moral taste* by presenting larger systems to our mind, and more extensive affections toward them; and thus finer objects are exhibited to the moral faculty, which it will approve, even when these affections oppose the effect of some narrower affections, which considered by themselves would be truly lovely. No need here of reference to an higher power of perception, or to reason.

Is not our reason itself also often wrong, when we rashly conclude from imperfect or partial evidence? must there be an higher power too to correct our reason? no; presenting more fully all the evidence on both sides, by serious attention, or the best exercise of the reasoning power, corrects the hasty judgment. Just so in the moral perceptions.

This moral sense from its very nature appears to be designed for regulating and controlling all our powers. This dignity and commanding nature we are immediately conscious of, as we are conscious of the power itself. Nor can such matters of immediate feeling be otherways proved but by appeals to our hearts. It does not estimate the good it recommends as merely differing in degree, tho' of the same kind with other advantages recommended by other senses, so as to allow us to practice smaller moral evils acknowledged to remain such, in order to obtain some great advantages of other sorts; or to omit what we judge in the present case to be our duty or morally good, that we may decline great evils of another sort. But as we immediately perceive the difference in kind, and that the dignity of enjoyment from fine poetry, painting, or from knowledge is superior to the pleasures of the palate, were they never so delicate; so we immediately

discern moral good to be superior in kind and dignity to all others which are perceived by the other perceptive powers.

In all other grateful perceptions, the less we shall relish our taste, the greater sacrifice we have made of inferior enjoyments to the superior; and our sense of the superior, after the first flutter of joy in our success is over, is not a whit increased by any sacrifice we have made to it: nay in the judgment of spectators, the superior enjoyment, or our state at least, is generally counted the worse on this account, and our conduct the less relished. Thus in sacrificing ease, or health, or pleasure, to wealth, power, or even to the ingenious arts; their pleasures gain no dignity by that means; and the conduct is not more alluring to others. But in moral good, the greater the necessary sacrifice was which was made to it, the moral excellence increases the more, and is the more approved by the agent, more admired by spectators, and the more they are roused to imitation. By this sense the heart can not only approve itself in sacrificing every other gratification to moral goodness, but have the highest self-enjoyment, and approbation of its own disposition in doing so: which plainly shows this moral sense to be naturally destined to command all the other powers.

To acknowledge the several generous ultimate affections of a limited kind to be natural, and yet maintain that we have no general controlling principle but self-love, which indulges or checks the generous affections as they conduce to, or oppose, our own noblest interest; sometimes allowing these kind affections their full exercise, because of that high enjoyment we expect to ourselves in gratifying them; at other times checking them, when their gratification does not over-balance the loss we may sustain by it; is a scheme which brings indeed all the powers of the mind into one direction by means of the reference made of them all to the calm desire of our own happiness, in our previous deliberations about our conduct: and it may be justly alleged that the Author of Nature has made a connection in the event at last between our gratifying our generous affections, and our own highest interest. But the feelings of our heart, reasons, and history, revolt against this account: which seems however to have been maintained by excellent authors and strenuous defenders of the cause of virtue.

This connection of our own highest interests with the gratifying our generous affections, in many cases is imperceptible to the mind; and the kind heart acts from its generous impulse, not thinking of its own interest. Nay all its own interests have sometimes appeared to it as opposite to, and inconsistent with the generous part, in which it persisted. Now were there no other calm original determination of soul but that toward one's own interest, that man must be approved entirely who steadily pursues his own happiness, in opposition to all kind affections and all public interest. That which is the sole calm determination, must justify every action in consequence of it, however opposite to particular kind affections. If it be said that " 'tis a mistake to imagine our interest opposite to them while there is a good providence": grant it to be a mistake; this is only a defect of reasoning; but that disposition of mind must upon this scheme be approved which coolly sacrifices the interest of the universe to its own interest.

This is plainly contrary to the feelings of our hearts.

Can that be deemed the sole ultimate determination, the sole ultimate end, which the mind in the exercise of its noblest powers can calmly resolve, with inward approbation, deliberately to counteract? are there not instances of men who have voluntarily sacrificed their lives, without thinking of any other state of existence, for the sake of their friends or their country? does not every heart approve this temper and conduct, and admire it the more, the less presumption there is of the love of glory and posthumous fame, or of any sublimer private interest mixing itself with the generous affection? does not the admiration rise higher, the more deliberately such resolutions are formed and executed? all this is unquestionably true, and yet would be absurd and impossible if self-interest of any kind is the sole ultimate termination of all calm desire. There is therefore another ultimate determination which our souls are capable of, destined to be also an original spring of the calmest and most deliberate purposes of action; a desire of communicating happiness, an ultimate good-will, not referred to any private interest, and often operating without such reference.

In those cases where some inconsistency appears between these two determinations, the moral faculty at once points out and recommends the glorious, the amiable part; not by suggesting prospects of future interests of a sublime sort by pleasures of self-approbation, or of praise. It recommends the generous part by an immediate undefinable perception; it approves the kind ardor of the heart in the sacrificing even of life itself, and that even in those who have no hopes of surviving, or no attention to a future life in another world. And thus, where the moral sense is in its full vigor, it makes the generous determination to public happiness the supreme one in the soul, with that commanding power which it is naturally destined to exercise.

It must be obvious we are not speaking here of the ordinary condition of mankind, as if these calm determinations were generally exercised, and habitually controlled the particular passions; but of the condition our nature can be raised to by due culture; and of the principles which may and ought to operate, when by attention we present to our minds the objects or representations fit to excite them. Doubtless some good men have exercised in life only the particular kind affections, and found a constant approbation of them, without either the most extensive views of the whole system, or the most universal benevolence. Scarce any of the vicious have ever considered wherein it is that their highest private happiness consists, and in consequence of it exerted the calm rational self-love; but merely follow inconsiderately the selfish appetites and affections. Much less have all good men made actual references of all private or generous affections to the extensive benevolence, tho' the mind can make them; or bad men made references of all their affections to calm self-love.

But as the selfish principles are very strong, and by custom, by early and frequent indulgences, and other causes, are raised in the greatest part of men above their due proportion, while the generous principles are little cultivated, and the moral sense often asleep; our powers of reasoning and comparing the

several enjoyments which our nature is capable of, that we may discover which of them are of greatest consequence to our happiness; our capacity, by reasoning, of arriving to the knowledge of a *Governing Mind* presiding in this world, and of a moral administration, are of the highest consequence and necessity to preserve our affections in a just order, and to corroborate our *moral faculty*: as by such reasoning and reflection we may discover a perfect consistency of all the generous motions of the soul with private interest, and find out a certain tenor of life and action the most effectually subservient to both these determinations.