

THE BRITISH MORALISTS ON HUMAN NATURE AND  
THE BIRTH OF SECULAR ETHICS

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Are human beings naturally good or evil? Are we naturally drawn to virtue or to vice? Is it natural for us to do the right thing, or must we resist something in our nature in order to do what is right? Call this the Human Nature Question.

Most of us have asked the Human Nature Question at one time or another. Sometimes it's other people's behavior that prompts us to ask it. Sometimes it's our own.

We may ask the Question when we hear of monstrous acts — of torture, genocide, slaughter. How could people do such things to each other? Is such behavior rooted in something natural to human beings, or is it a perversion of what we naturally are? We may ask the Question when we hear of acts of great generosity and self-sacrifice. Are people who do such things shining examples of the basic goodness of human beings, or can their acts be explained by factors less flattering to humanity? We may ask the Question when we scrutinize our own, relatively normal conduct and motivation. What leads us to act in the ways we do? Is it something we should be proud of, or something that is not at all to our credit?

Our answer to the Question will greatly influence our view of ourselves and others, and it can play a leading role in our conception of morality, of what it means to live as we ought. It should come as no surprise, therefore, to find that responses to the Question have been central to accounts of morality and human nature throughout the ages, from ancient Greek moral philosophy to medieval Christian theology to modern European political theory to contemporary sociobiology.

In this study, I will examine how the Human Nature Question shaped moral thought in Great Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In Part One, I will describe the Negative Answer (i.e., human nature is basically evil) of the English Calvinists and the Positive Answer (i.e., human nature is basically good) of the Cambridge Platonists. In Part Two, I will explore the Positive Answer of the third Earl of Shaftesbury. In Part Three, I will explore the Positive Answer of Francis Hutcheson. And in Part Four, I will explain how David Hume undermined the Question and thus cleared the way for a “science” of morality and human nature “built on a foundation almost entirely new” (THN Introduction 6).

By focusing on the Human Nature Question, I believe, we will gain a particularly clear view of some of the most important features of the changing philosophical landscape of the early modern period. Such a focus will elucidate the rise of religious liberty and the increased use of empirical observation in accounts of morality and human nature. It will reveal a Copernican Revolution in moral philosophy, a shift from thinking of morality as a standard against which human nature as a whole can be measured to thinking of morality as itself a part of human nature.

And, perhaps most significantly, it will help explain the birth of modern secular ethics — of ethical thought that is entirely independent of religious and theological commitment. In 1600, almost all English-speaking moral philosophy was completely embedded in a Christian framework. But by 1700, some philosophers had begun to develop moral positions that, while still fundamentally theistic, lacked any distinctively Christian elements. And by 1750, still other philosophers had begun to advance accounts of morality that were disengaged not only from Christianity but also from belief in God. This transition was one of the most momentous in the history of European ideas, and an explanation of how it occurred will uncover the roots of contemporary secular positions on the origins of morality as well as the roots of some of the deepest worries about those positions.