ON THE ALLEGED INCOMPATIBILITY BETWEEN SENTIMENTALISM AND MORAL CONFIDENCE

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I

Moral rationalism is defined in part by the claim that the everyday moral consciousness of each of us is deeply informed by the belief that the foundation of morality is purely rational. According to rationalists, therefore, our everyday moral consciousness is such that we can be fully confident in moral judgments only if we believe that they originate in reason alone. Moral sentimentalism is defined in part by the claim that moral judgments can never originate in reason alone. Rationalists hold, consequently, that our confidence in our moral judgments would crumble if we came to believe that moral sentimentalism is true. For rationalists hold that we can be fully confident in a moral judgment only if we believe that it possesses a feature that sentimentalism denies any moral judgment ever can possess.

I will call this rationalist view the incompatibility thesis, where the incompatibility lies between confidence in our moral judgments and belief in sentimentalism. Rationalists have argued for the incompatibility thesis in a number of different ways. In this paper I will examine one particular argument for the thesis, which I will call the argument from necessity. This argument states, roughly, that we can have confidence in a moral judgment only if we believe that it is grounded in what is necessarily the case. But, the argument continues, it is not necessarily the case that we possess the sentiments we happen to possess. Therefore, the argument concludes, since sentimentalism asserts that all moral judgments are grounded in sentiments (which are non-necessary), our coming to
believe in sentimentalism would lead ineluctably to our losing confidence in our moral judgments.

Why examine the argument from necessity? Three reasons. First of all, an insistence on the necessity of morals marks much of the work of the eighteenth century moral rationalists intent on refuting the sentimentalism of Hutcheson and Hume; I am unaware, however, of attempts to elucidate the reasoning behind those anti-sentimentalist necessity claims. Secondly, exploring the idea of the necessity of morals will bring to light deep differences between sentimentalists and rationalists, differences that characterize the views even of those sentimentalists and rationalists who do not explicitly discuss the necessity of morals. And thirdly, the eighteenth century rationalists were attuned to something important about our everyday moral consciousness when they emphasized the necessity of morals, something that contemporary rationalists and sentimentalists alike would do well to attend to; for the argument from necessity constitutes one of the more initially plausible reasons for accepting the central conceptual claim of moral rationalism, and it is consequently an argument that contemporary sentimentalists need to address, even if contemporary rationalists are less likely than their eighteenth century counterparts to insist on it.\(^2\)

I will begin by looking, in section II, at expressions of the incompatibility thesis in the works of John Balguy, Richard Price and Kant.\(^3\) I will then, in section III, discuss two approaches one might try to take in arguing for the incompatibility thesis and explain why these approaches will not work against what I will call sophisticated or reflective sentimentalism. Next, in section IV, I will show that the argument from necessity was Balguy, Price and Kant’s most important support for the incompatibility thesis and will present a reconstruction of that argument that has both historical and philosophical plausibility. I will close, in section V, by considering how sentimentalists might respond to the argument from necessity.

II

Balguy advances the incompatibility thesis forcefully and often in his attack on Hutcheson’s moral sense theory. As he puts it in one typical passage, “[I]f the two Instincts of Affection and Moral Sense be the only Pillars on which Moral Goodness rests, how secure it may stand I know not; but am afraid its Honour, its Dignity, its Beauty will suffer in the eyes of a great part of the rational World” (Balguy 1976 [v. 1], 8–9). He goes on to emphasize “how much Virtue is depreciated and dishonoured by so ignoble an Original”
as the instinct of benevolence, and insists that "if Virtue and the Approval of Virtue be merely instinctive; we must certainly think less highly and less honourably of it, than we should do if we looked upon it as Rational" (Balguy 1976 [v. 1], 20–1). The moral sense theory, Balguy continues, comes very close to "exposing [morality] to Ridicule" (Balguy 1976 [v. 1], 27). As he puts it in another work (one not explicitly concerned with Hutcheson), "If the only Difference, whether in the Natural or Moral World, between Beauty and Deformity, Order and Confusion, be an Aptitude to give Pleasure; what is called Moral Good, must be a mere Chimera" (Balguy 1734, 426).

Price's attacks on Hutcheson and Hume also clearly invoke the incompatibility thesis. Price claims, for instance, that "if right and wrong denote effects of sensation, it must imply the greatest absurdity to suppose them applicable to actions" (Price, 46). It follows, then, according to Price, that belief in Hutcheson and Hume's sentimentalism will lead inexorably to the belief that the whole activity of moral judgment is absurd. Thus, as Price explains it, if people were to come to believe in moral sentimentalism, they would also come to believe that they did not have any reason not to "labour to suppress in themselves this determination [to make moral judgments], and to extirpate from their natures all the delusive ideas of morality, worth, and virtue" (Price, 48). And "though the ruin of the world should follow" from people's extirpating "from their natures" their moral ideas, they still would not be able to find anything "really wrong in" it if they truly believed in sentimentalism.

Kant's commitment to the incompatibility thesis is similarly evident in his attacks on moral "empiricism" in the Groundwork and the Second Critique. As he puts it in one passage in the Groundwork, "Hence everything that is empirical is, as a contribution to the principle of morality, not only wholly unsuitable for the purpose, but is even highly injurious to the purity of morals. . . . Against the slack, or indeed ignoble, attitude which seeks for the moral principle among empirical motives and laws we cannot give a warning too strongly or too often" (Kant 1964, 93–4). He makes the same point in the Second Critique, when he argues that empiricism "substitutes for duty something entirely different, namely, an empirical interest, with which inclinations generally are secret in league. For this reason empiricism is allied with the inclinations, which, no matter what style they wear, always degrade mankind when they are raised to the dignity of a supreme practical principle. But these inclinations are so favorable to everyone's feeling that empiricism is far more dangerous than all mystical enthusiasm." (Kant 1956, 74). Now Kant held that explicitly egoistic sentimental
views (such as those of Hobbes or the Epicureans) are particularly destructive of confidence in morality, since such views “totally destroy [morality’s] sublimity, inasmuch as the motives of virtue are put in the same class as those of vice and we are instructed only to become better at calculation, the specific difference between virtue and vice being completely wiped out” (Kant 1964, 110). Kant is initially less severe with Hutcheson’s seemingly non-egoistic moral sense view, as it at least “does virtue the honour of ascribing to her immediately the approval and esteem in which she is held, and does not, as it were, tell her to her face that we are attached to her, not for her beauty, but only for our own advantage” (Kant 1964, 110). But it is clear that Kant believes that even the seemingly non-egoistic moral sense is “totally incompetent to support [morality] as its foundation” (Kant 1964, 111). As Kant explains it in the concluding paragraphs of chapter two of the Groundwork, if morality really is grounded only in a moral sense and not in reason alone, then we will all have to admit that it is “merely a chimerical idea without truth,” a “mere phantom of the brain” (Kant 1964, 112). Or as Kant puts it in The Metaphysics of Morals, “[I]f eudamonism (the principle of happiness) is set up as the basic principle instead of eleutheronomy (the principle of the freedom of internal lawgiving), the result is the euthanasia (easy death) of all morals” (Kant 1996, 143).

III

What arguments do rationalists give for the incompatibility thesis? Well, at times, some of them seem to think that the thesis is so obvious that it barely needs any argument at all. What rationalists have in mind when they find the incompatibility thesis so obvious is the thought of how inadequate it would be for us to offer as a justification for a moral judgment of ours a statement simply of how we happen to feel at that particular time or what we happen to want. For our feelings and wants vary from moment to moment, but morality clearly does not. As Balguy puts it, “[T]o make the Rectitude of Moral Actions dependent upon Instinct, and in proportion to the Warmth and Strength of the Moral Sense, rise and fall, like Spirits in a Thermometer; is depreciating the most sacred thing in the World, and almost exposing it to Ridicule” (Balguy 1976 [v. 1], 26–7). Similarly, Price rhetorically asks, “Is there a greater absurdity, than to suppose, that the moral rectitude of an action is nothing absolute and unvarying; but capable, like all the modifications of pleasure and pain, of being intended and remitted, increasing and lessening, of rising and sinking with the force and liveliness of
our feelings?” (Price 47). Price goes on to point out that if moral judgments were grounded simply in how we happen to feel at the moment, it would then be impossible for us ever to make incorrect moral judgments. Whatever seemed right or morally good to us would really be right or morally good. But when making moral judgments we all assume that there is a distinction between is and seems; when we make moral judgments we try to get it right and believe we can go wrong. And so sentimentalism would seem to be incompatible with a fundamental presupposition of our activity of moral judgment, namely, the presupposition that it is possible for us to err. As Price puts it when attacking Hume, “But the notion of virtue I have mentioned makes it plainly no object of any rational estimate, leaves no fixed standard of it, and implies that all apprehensions of it are equally just” (Price, 212).

Rationalists can win such a quick victory for the incompatibility thesis, however, only when contesting with a very crude sentimental position, one according to which moral judgments are grounded entirely in occurrent phenomenologically robust passions. But neither Hutcheson nor Hume—nor, for that matter, many late twentieth century sentimentalists—advance such a crude position. Most sentimentalists hold, rather, that a moral judgment is correct only if it accords with a sentiment felt upon full reflection. And most sentimentalists acknowledge that people can and often do make moral judgments when they have not fully reflected. So such sentimentalists—whom I will call reflective sentimentalists—can explain why one’s occurrent phenomenologically robust passions are unreliable moral guides and are thus able to accommodate a distinction between correct and incorrect moral judgments.

It might be thought, though, that there is a way in which rationalists can win a quick victory for the incompatibility thesis even while contesting with this sophisticated, reflective variety of sentimentalism—namely, by emphasizing the latter’s relativistic implications. For all reflective sentimentalism tells us, a rationalist might argue, it could be the case that what one person approves of on full reflection will differ from or conflict with what another person approves of on full reflection. Even reflective sentimentalism thus implies that what is right or morally good for one person could be wrong or morally bad for another. But when we make moral judgments, according to this rationalist argument, we presuppose that what is right or morally good for one person is also right or morally good for everyone else. Sentimentalism would, thus, seem to imply that our entire activity of moral judging presupposes something false, and from this it would seem to follow
that belief in sentimentalism would go hand-in-hand with a loss of confidence in our moral judgments.

There is, however, no quick victory for the incompatibility thesis through the relativity route either, for it is far from self-evident that our concept of morality implies such strict non-relativity. It is far from self-evident, that is, that we are all committed to thinking that it is a conceptual impossibility that what is right or morally good for one person could differ from or conflict with what is right or morally good for someone else. Now it is true that any viable moral theory will have to account for the fact that morality generally resolves or reduces conflict. But that does not speak against the possibility of having confidence in reflective sentimentally-grounded moral judgments. For reflective sentimentalism, particularly of the Humean variety, does a stellar job of explaining why reflection brings our sentiments into harmony. Indeed, since conflict is something almost all of us almost always want to avoid, and the process of reflection that produces correct moral judgments on reflective sentimentalist views will include the consideration of whether or not the object of evaluation will create conflict, it seems especially unlikely that there will be vast, violent and pervasive disagreement between our sentimentally-grounded moral judgments made upon full reflection.

Putative relativistic implications are not, in any event, the most fundamental reason underlying the eighteenth century rationalists’ commitment to the incompatibility thesis. For the rationalists maintain that belief in sentimentalism would undermine confidence in morality even if it were the case that the sentimentally-grounded moral judgments of all people were uniform. Balguy, for instance, tells us that a sentimentalist moral “Foundation” would be “dishonorable, whether it were variable or no” (Balguy 1976 [v. 2], 62). “The Universality of a Moral Affection and a Moral Sense,” as he puts it, “does not remove the Imputation we are speaking of” (Balguy 1976 [v. 2], 65). Similarly, Kant maintains that “it is of the utmost importance to take warning that we should not dream for a moment of trying to derive the reality of this [fundamental moral] principle from the special characteristics of human nature . . . from certain feelings and propensities, and even, if this were possible, from some special bent peculiar to human reason” (Kant 1964, 92). Even more to the point, Kant says, “I need not mention the fact that universality of assent does not prove the objective validity of a judgment, i.e., its validity as knowledge, but only call attention to the fact that, even if sometimes that which is universally assented to is also correct, this is no proof of its agreement with the object”
(Kant 1956, 13). Every non-rational aspect of our constitution, as the rationalists see it, is incapable of supporting a moral judgment, and that goes for non-rational aspects idiosyncratic to individuals as well as for non-rational aspects that all persons might share. So since even a sentimentalist position that ensures moral agreement among all humans would fall afoul of the rationalist incompatibility thesis, the thesis must ultimately be grounded in something other than a resistance to relativity.

IV

What does ground the incompatibility thesis for Balguy, Price, and Kant is their belief that our moral judgments aspire to a type of necessity that sentiments cannot fund. Balguy, for instance, supports his charge that Hutcheson’s moral sense theory dishonors morality by pointing out that Hutcheson fails to show that morality originates in a principle “not only Natural, but Necessary” (Balguy 1976 [v. 1], 9). It is, Balguy goes on to argue, just because all sentiments (even God’s) lack necessity that “whoever undertakes to demonstrate Morality by the sole Principle of Sense, or Sentiment, is so far from being able to succeed, that he has no Ground to stand upon, no Place to set his Foot” (Balguy 1976 [v. 2], 59). For as Balguy sees it, our moral ideas must be characterized by “the same Necessity of Nature that makes the Three Angles of a Triangle equal to Two Right ones; or that fixes a certain Proportion between a Cone and a Cylinder of the same Base and Height” (Balguy 1976 [v. 2], 6).

Similarly, Price asserts that it is “indisputable” that “we express necessary truth, when we say of some actions, they are right; and of others, they are wrong” (Price, 47). Price thus maintains that if “right and wrong” and “moral good and evil” express “real characters of actions,” then “they must immutably and necessarily belong to those actions of which they are truly affirmed” (Price, 50). Morality, if it exists at all for Price, must be “a branch of necessary truth, and have the same foundation with it” (Price, 85).

Kant reveals a similar commitment to the necessity of morals when he writes, “It may be added that unless we wish to deny to the concept of morality all truth and all relation to a possible object, we cannot dispute that its law is of such widespread significance as to hold, not merely for men, but for all rational beings as such—not merely subject to contingent conditions and exceptions, but with absolute necessity” (Kant 1964, 76; see also 57). Kant’s discussion of moral worth also suggests a commitment to the necessity of
morals (even if he was concerned there to make other points as well), for it seems to be an implication of that discussion that a person’s “maxim” cannot have “moral content” if it is ultimately determined by a contingent factor, such as the coincidence between not overcharging inexperienced customers and running a profitable shop or the possession of a sympathetic temper (Kant 1964, 64–7). Kant finds the conduct of the “sensible shopkeeper” and the “sympathetic spirits” not morally worthy not because the principles that ground their conduct inevitably will lead them to act contrary to duty (it might, after all, turn out that the coincidence between not overcharging and profitability holds during the shopkeeper’s entire working life, and that the sympathetic person never loses his sympathy) but because those principles could lead them to act contrary to duty—not because there is no connection between the principles of action and duty but because the connection is merely contingent.

It is on the basis of passages such as these that I attribute to the rationalists the argument from necessity. I have already stated the argument roughly. Let us now look at it in somewhat more detail.

The argument from necessity runs as follows.

1. We will have confidence in a moral judgment only if we believe that it is necessary—only, that is, if it is such that we cannot imagine assenting to its negation.

2. If a judgment originates in sentiment it will not be necessary—we will, that is, be able to imagine assenting to the negation of any judgment originating in sentiment.

3. Sentimentalism asserts that all moral judgments originate in sentiment.

Therefore, 4. If we believe in sentimentalism we will not be able to have confidence in any of our moral judgments.

Now the second and third premises of this argument look to be at least initially fairly uncontroversial. But the first premise—which I will call the confidence-only-in-necessity claim—is much less obvious. So let us now clarify the meaning of the confidence-only-in-necessity claim, fit the claim into the overall thought of the rationalists, and try to determine why they maintained it.

Let us note, first of all, that the confidence-only-in-necessity claim should not be read so as to imply that we can have confidence in particular moral judgments only if we think those judgments follow simply from necessary truths. For the rationalists are well-aware
that a morally confident person can knowingly attend to contingent non-moral facts relevant to the situation about which she must make a moral judgment. But the rationalists do hold that we will have confidence in particular moral judgments only if we believe that they follow from contingent non-moral facts and from general moral principles—such as Kant’s formulations of the categorical imperative or Price’s moral “axioms”—that we cannot imagine not assenting to. According to the rationalists, that is, our confidence in a particular moral judgment presupposes the belief in a general moral principle that is both necessary and determinate enough to imply, in conjunction with the relevant non-moral facts, that particular moral judgment. (It should thus be kept in mind that the necessity of particular moral judgments is inherited from the necessity of the general moral principles underlying them. So when I say that a particular moral judgment is necessary, that should be read as shorthand for the more cumbersome statement that the particular moral judgment is grounded in a general moral principle that is necessary.)

Let us also note that the confidence-only-in-necessity claim does not imply that we are now and have always been consciously aware of every necessary moral truth there is. For the rationalists can maintain that just as we learned (or recollected) some of the arithmetic and geometric truths we are now consciously aware of, so too did we learn (or recollect) some of the necessary moral truths. But the rationalists do believe that true general moral principles, like arithmetic and geometric truths, are such that we will not be able to imagine not having assented to them once we had become consciously aware of them.

It is important as well for us to be aware of how the confidence-only-in-necessity claim fits into the overall philosophical position of the rationalists, and a good indication of that is the rationalists’ emphasis on how obvious the confidence-only-in-necessity claim is. Price, for instance, says that “the more we enquire, the more indubitable, I imagine, it will appear to us, that we express necessary truth, when we say of some actions, they are right” (Price, 47), while Kant says that the fact “that a law has to carry with it absolute necessity if it is to be valid morally” is something “every one must admit” (Kant 1964, 57) and that the concept of the good will that underlies his account of moral worth “is already present in a sound natural understanding and requires not so much to be taught as merely clarified” (Kant 1964, 64). Now we could take these statements of obviousness to be mere rhetorical flourishes, but it’s pretty
clear that they have more philosophical significance than that. What these statements signal is the rationalists' goal to articulate the ideas about morality that average morally aware people possess. They signal the intention—which underlies both Price's appeals “to every man’s consciousness” and Kant’s method of “proceed[ing] analytically from common knowledge”—to elucidate the thoughts implicit in the activity of making moral judgments as it is engaged in in everyday life.

For the rationalists, therefore, the confidence-only-in-necessity claim must be true, if it is true at all, of common sense or “the concept of morality generally in vogue” (Kant 1964, 112). It must answer to the concept of morality in which our everyday moral terms and practices are already embedded. If, then, the confidence-only-in-necessity claim bears no resemblance to everyday moral thought, then it must be counted a failure by the rationalists’ own lights. 13

Now the idea that everyday moral thought somehow contains a commitment to the confidence-only-in-necessity claim might initially seem rather doubtful, since it initially seems rather doubtful that everyday moral judges have many thoughts at all about the modality of their judgments. I believe, however, that the rationalists can mount a not-implausible argument that the confidence-only-in-necessity claim follows from an idea that is most definitely contained in the thought of everyday moral judges—namely, that the confidence-only-in-necessity claim follows from the idea that we cannot have confidence in a moral judgment if we think that it is arbitrary. 14

Of course there is a difference between the claim that we cannot have confidence in a moral judgment that is arbitrary and the claim that we cannot have confidence in a moral judgment that is non-necessary—the difference, that is, between arbitrariness and contingency. And one could maintain that while arbitrary moral judgments are always failures, contingent moral judgments can succeed. Indeed, this is just what Hume and Hutcheson do maintain—that while our reflective moral judgments are contingent (we’d make different ones if we had different sentiments) they are nonetheless non-arbitrary. The rationalist confidence-only-in-necessity claim asserts, however, that all contingent moral judgments are failures. And the rationalists could attempt to establish the claim that contingency always spells failure in the moral realm by trying to show that contingency in the moral realm always implies arbitrariness.

The particular way in which rationalists can draw a not-implausible link between their hostility to contingency and everyday ideas about arbitrariness 15 is by focusing on a necessary judgment’s peculiarly
negative relationship to the past and its consequent resistance to explanation in terms of events. A necessary judgment is one that we not only assent to here and now but also would have assented to (once we had become consciously aware of it) no matter how different past events may have been. So if a moral judgment is necessary, then my assent to it will be explained simply by the judgment's being correct and not by the occurrence of any past events, since a sequence of events that would have led to my not assenting to it will be unimaginable. And indeed, the rationalists do suggest that true general moral judgments possess this feature of being explainable simply in terms of their correctness and not in terms of past events. The rationalists seem to think, that is, that the general moral principles that would constitute the premises of any sound moral demonstrations are such that we cannot imagine not assenting to them just because we cannot explain our assent to them in terms of past events.

It is, however, not uncommon in everyday life to argue for the arbitrariness of someone's moral judgment by pointing out that it is grounded in a moral commitment that that person possesses only because of past events. It is not uncommon, that is, to offer as an argument against someone's moral judgment an event-explanation of how she came to be the sort of person who made it, i.e., an explanation of her moral judgment that refers not to the correctness of the commitment that grounds it but to events that lead her to possess that commitment. It seems, then, that we can find within our everyday moral practice the idea that at least sometimes the existence of an event-explanation undermines a moral judgment.

Now my suggestion is that the best chance the rationalists have of linking contingency and arbitrariness in the moral realm and thus of establishing the confidence-only-in-necessity claim is to try to show that we can find within our everyday moral practice the idea that the existence of an event-explanation always undermines a moral judgment. For it does not seem entirely implausible to me to draw from the situations in which event-explanations uncontroversially undermine moral judgments the conclusion that event-explanations in general undermine moral judgments, and the claim that event-explanations in general undermine moral judgments does imply that we can have confidence in a moral judgment only if we think it is necessary in the sense the rationalists require (i.e., it does imply the confidence-only-in-necessity claim).

To make clearer this link between common ideas of arbitrariness and the rationalist hostility to contingency, let us now look at some
examples of moral judgments that both lack the necessity rationalists require and also seem to fail because of their arbitrariness.

Imagine, for instance, that an employer A fires an employee B after B shows up late to work for a third time in a row. But A would not have made the decision to fire B that morning, let us suppose, had A not been extremely irritated and impatient at the time. And A was irritated and impatient at the time only because her drive into work that morning was particularly unpleasant and because she missed her usual cup of coffee. A’s judgment, thus, is not necessary, since if past events had been different—if A’s drive into work had been more pleasant and if she had had a cup of coffee—A would have made a different judgment.

Now imagine that A’s drive into work is quite pleasant and she has a good cup of coffee when she gets there, and that as a result she is in a happy and forgiving mood. So she decides not to fire B. A’s judgment fails to meet the rationalist standard in this case as well. For as in the first case, A’s judgment can be explained by past events, which makes it easy for us to imagine scenarios in which A would not have made the judgment she has made (namely, scenarios in which the traffic had been snarled or the coffee had been burned).

Next imagine that A decides to fire B, and that her judgment this time is grounded in her commitment to the general moral principle that one ought never to violate the explicit policies of the company for which one works (where the policy in question states that employees will be fired after coming in late three times in one pay period). A is so strongly committed to this general moral principle, however, only because when she was young her parents punished her brutally for even the most minor infractions of the most niggling rule. We are supposing, that is, that A would not have possessed this commitment to obedience had her parents been less strict. Once again, then, A’s particular judgment to fire B fails by the rationalist standard of necessity, for that particular judgment is grounded in a moral commitment of A’s that can be explained by past events and so it is possible for us to imagine A’s not possessing that commitment and thus not making the same particular moral judgment.

It is clear that A’s first two judgments are too arbitrary for us to have confidence in, so we can see how the rationalist view of the necessity of morals could be enlisted to give an account of the arbitrariness that undermines those judgments. In both cases, A would have made a different judgment had past events turned out differently. In the first case, for instance, A’s decision to fire B was
determined by her snarled drive into work that morning. But if B really deserved firing, then B would have deserved firing even if the traffic had been clear; and if B would have deserved to be kept on had the traffic that morning been clear, then B would have deserved to be kept on even though the traffic was in fact snarled. So since A would have made a different judgment had the traffic been different, B could make a very good case for the claim that his dismissal was arbitrary. And what is crucial for our purposes is that it would be rather appropriate for B to argue for the arbitrariness of A's judgment by citing the event-explanation of how she came to make it. We might, that is, very well expect B to criticize A in a manner that suggests the rationalist claim that we can have confidence in moral judgments only if we think they are necessary, i.e., only if they have a peculiarly negative relationship to past events. (The same charge of arbitrariness also applies of course to A's judgment in the second case, since there too A would have made a different judgment had the traffic been different.)

Perhaps it is somewhat less clear that A's judgment in the third case is vitiated by arbitrariness as well, but in that case too we might expect B to claim that A's decision is arbitrary because she would not have made it had past events been different. For A would not have fired B, in the third case, were she not committed to an ironclad refusal to allow special exceptions to company policy, and she would not have possessed such a commitment were it not for her peculiarly rigid upbringing. But A's peculiarly rigid upbringing, B might argue, is just as irrelevant to the moral issues of whether B ought to be fired as was the traffic on A's drive into work. "So you refuse even to consider the possibility of a reasonable exception to company policy," B could say to A, "because your parents raised you in a certain way. But that's just a morally inert bit of autobiography. For it is clear that the fact of whether or not it is right for you to fire me is not sensitive to the fact of how you happened to be raised."

Now what the rationalists could argue is that all sentimentally-grounded judgments possess the feature of arbitrariness that fairly clearly undermines A's three moral judgments described above. For all sentimentally-grounded judgments are determined by past events having affected the judge's sentimental make-up in a certain way, and so all sentimentally-grounded judgments lack a logically necessary anchor. A's judgments as described above were determined by events unique to her experience, while other sentimentally-grounded judgments could be determined by events common to the experience of an entire society or to all of humanity. The rationalists could maintain,
however, that so long as one's judgment is determined by events having affected one's sentimental make-up, then one's judgment is still as arbitrary as A's, regardless of whether or not the same (type of) event affected others' sentimental make-ups in the same (type of) way.

Imagine, for instance, that A's decision to fire B was determined by her commitment to the general moral principle that rules ought always to be obeyed, and that all members of her society possessed the same commitment as a result of strong societal pressure exerted on children from an early age to obey authority. Rationalists could still maintain that A's judgment in this case is just as arbitrary as A's judgment in the first case, when she fired B because snarled traffic put her in an irritated and impatient mood. For the fact that A happened to be raised in a certain society is no more relevant to the question of whether B ought to be fired or kept on than was the fact that the traffic was snarled one morning. For the morality of firing A is no more sensitive to facts of where A was raised than it is to facts of the morning traffic. And the fact that others were raised in the same way as A does not change that. If how A was raised is irrelevant, then it will remain irrelevant no matter how others were raised.

Imagine, next, that A's judgment is determined by her commitment to the general moral principle that one ought to create the most agreeable and productive environment possible for those in one's sphere of daily influence, and that A possesses this commitment because she's come to associate the creation of such an environment with her own well-being. Let us also suppose that A associates these two things only because evolutionary pressures on her distant ancestors selected for the tendency to associate in just this way. But the evolutionary pressures on her distant ancestors are irrelevant to the question of whether B ought to be fired or kept on. For if it is right for A to fire B, then it would be right even if A's distant ancestors had faced different evolutionary pressures. A's judgment in this case is, however, one she would not have made if those distant evolutionary pressures had been different. So since it is determined by an irrelevant fact, A's judgment, on the rationalist view, is once again arbitrary.

Now imagine that A's judgment is determined by her commitment to the general moral principle that one ought to try to create as much happiness in the world as possible, and that A possesses this commitment because the Author of her Nature implanted in her a sense that approves of the motive of universal benevolence. But her Author's decision to implant in her a sense approving of
universal benevolence, let us suppose, was uncontrolled by constraints of any kind. Her Author, in other words, could just as easily have implanted in her a very different kind of sense. A's judgment, therefore, would be arbitrary, for since we would be able to imagine her Author's having implanted in A a very different sense we would also be able to imagine A's not possessing the underlying moral commitment in which her particular moral judgment is grounded. Indeed, if her Author's choice to implant in her the sense approving of universal benevolence really was utterly and completely free of all prior constraints (including moral constraints), then that choice itself would have been an arbitrary one. But if that choice of A's Author was arbitrary, then A's judgments will be arbitrary too so long as they are determined by that choice. And that arbitrariness will not at all be mitigated by A's Author having chosen to implant in every other person the same sense He implanted in A.

These charges of arbitrariness might seem to have some plausibility. It might seem, that is, that in each of the cases, A's judgment looks to be determined by something that we might plausibly claim is irrelevant to the moral issue of whether or not B ought to be fired. But how will this charge of arbitrariness be applied to a moral judgment that is correct according to reflective sentimentalism, which tells us that moral judgments are correct only if they accord with sentiments felt upon full reflection?

In order to answer that question, it will be helpful to explain in a bit more detail (albeit still pretty schematically) the nature of a sentimentally-grounded judgment made on full reflection. Now full reflection includes a knowledge of the relevant facts of the object of evaluation, the lack of any false beliefs about the object of evaluation, and the active and conscious consideration of the relevant facts about the object of evaluation. So if A feels approval toward the action of firing B while she still has reason to believe that there are some relevant facts about the situation that she has not yet come to know, or if A has reason to believe that some of her current beliefs about the situation are false, then A will have reason to doubt that firing B is the right thing to do. And if those first two conditions are fulfilled, but A has reason to believe that if she were to reflect further on what she knows about the situation she might reach a point at which she will stop feeling approval toward the action of firing B, then A will continue to have reason for doubting that she ought to fire B. But now imagine that A sits down in a cool hour and considers all the facts that she can possibly make available to herself concerning the situation. A does her best to attend consciously to all these facts, not to ignore one thing
nor to exaggerate another. Imagine also that A engages in this reflective activity for some time, and that as she does so—as she considers and reconsiders the facts—she tends first one way and then the other. After only a minute of reflection, for instance, A may feel approval toward firing B, while after five minutes of reflection she may feel disapproval toward the firing; after ten minutes of reflection, she may feel neither approval nor disapproval, while after fifteen minutes she may feel approval once again. But eventually, let us suppose, A reaches a stage at which she feels approval toward firing B and at which she can locate no (new) fact whose (re)consideration will cause her to change her mind. She will not change her mind, that is, no matter how much more thinking she does. It is this judgment that A has settled on, the judgment that accords with a determination of her mind that no amount of further thought will unsettle, that is correct according to reflective sentimentalism. And our question is whether the rationalist charge of arbitrariness will stick to such a judgment.

Initially, we might think that the charge of arbitrariness will not stick to A’s fully reflective judgment. For that judgment is determined by the facts of how the object being judged is actually constituted and such facts are what we typically think of as quintessentially non-arbitrary. But rationalists will claim that A’s judgment will still be arbitrary, even if made on full reflection, if it is grounded in sentiment. For that judgment will not be determined simply by the facts of how the object being judged is constituted. It will also be determined by A’s sentimental response to those facts. For if A had a different sentimental make-up—if the object she is judging aroused in A different sentiments from those that it in fact arouses—then A would have made a different judgment on full reflection. But A’s sentimental make-up is something we can imagine having been otherwise. We can imagine, that is, A’s having different sentiments as a result of having had different past experiences, or as a result of having been raised in a different place by a different family, or as a result of there being different evolutionary pressures on her distant ancestors, or as a result of God having made a different “implanting” decision, etc. And since those past events were morally irrelevant in the cases described above, they are morally irrelevant in this case as well. So as the rationalists see it, even A’s fully reflective judgment, if it is sentimentally-grounded, will be sensitive to an irrelevant fact. It is true that this irrelevant fact is one that A can discover only through properly discerning the object of evaluation, for a sentimentally-grounded judgment made upon full reflection is determined by the
fact of how one feels about the object upon properly discerning it. But the fact that A feels a certain way upon properly discerning an object is still irrelevant nonetheless. For our idea of morality, according to the rationalists, implies that if a particular moral judgment is the right one to make, then it would have been the right one to make even if one had had different past experiences or had been socialized in a different way or one’s distant ancestors had faced different evolutionary pressures or one had been implanted with different desires.

This raises a really deep and fascinating difference between rationalism and sentimentalism. Rationalists and sentimentalists (at least those I am calling reflective sentimentalists, which includes virtually all sentimentalists worth discussing) both believe that one’s occurrent phenomenologically robust feelings are unreliable guides to how one ought morally to conduct oneself. For there is an arbitrariness to how one happens to feel at any given moment, but the person who conducts herself morally does not act arbitrarily. Rationalists and sentimentalists also both believe that reflection—or the use of one’s rational faculties—is the way in which one can seek to dispel arbitrariness from one’s conduct. Let us suppose for the moment, though, that the substantive claim of sentimentalism is true, that reason alone cannot deliver practical decisions, that when we are making moral judgments our rational faculties are capable only of paving the way for the experience of a sentiment, and that even our fully reflective judgments are ones we could imagine not having assented to. Sentimentalists will continue to maintain that our rational faculties can dispel arbitrariness and that there is a crucial distinction to be drawn between reflective and unreflective action; they will continue to maintain that one’s reflective judgments are less arbitrary than one’s unreflective ones even while acknowledging that if past events had been different one might have decided on full reflection to conduct oneself in a manner that full reflection now leads one to disapprove of. But rationalists will deny this, maintaining that our rational faculties will be incapable of dispensing arbitrariness if the judgment they happen to lead one to is one they would have led one away from had past events been different. Thus, if the substantive claim of sentimentalism is true, as the rationalists see it, there is really no reason to conduct oneself reflectively instead of impulsively, no basis for any confidence in our rational faculties. For as the rationalists see it, the substantive claim of sentimentalism implies that it is an arbitrary fact that reflection leads one to assent to one moral judgment rather than any other.
So imagine that my immediate impulse is to perform action x but that on full reflection I would instead be motivated to perform action y. According to the sentimentalists, it will be morally worthwhile for me to perform y even if I can imagine being the sort of person who would on full reflection be motivated to perform x. But according to the rationalists, it will be morally worthwhile for me to perform y only if it is impossible for me to imagine that full reflection could lead me to be motivated to perform x. Sentimentalists, thus, will have moral confidence in their rational faculties even while thinking that those faculties enable them only to learn a contingent fact about themselves, while rationalists will have moral confidence in their rational faculties only if those faculties inform them of a necessary truth.

How could rationalists argue that their view captures common ideas of morality better than the sentimentalists'? They could do so by emphasizing the extent to which sentimentality assimilates moral judgments to other types of judgments that we all agree are too arbitrary to achieve what moral judgments aspire to. Consider, for instance, judgments within a particularly changeable field of fashion, such as judgments about the proper width for men's ties. It might be the case that I have very strong feelings about how wide the tie I wear today ought to be. It might also be the case that no matter how much more I think about the matter I will continue to feel that way, that no amount of reflection will unsettle my judgment that I ought to wear a tie of this width and not a tie of that width. I might even say, "I can't imagine deciding to wear a tie like that." But really I will be able to imagine it. For I am well-aware of the vicissitudes of tie-fashion. And I must admit that had I been born and bred in a different fashion-world, my reflections would have led me to choose a tie that I now find repulsive. I must admit, that is, that although on full reflection I now make a certain tie-width judgment, it could very well have transpired that I came on full reflection to make a tie-width judgment antithetical to it. By admitting this possibility, however, I seem to be admitting that there is an underlying arbitrariness to the entire activity of tie-width judgment, that my preferring one tie on full reflection rather than another is in a crucial respect an arbitrary fact. I seem to be admitting that it isn't really necessary that I wear this tie rather than that one, that I don't have to opt for any particular tie width. Now such an admission will not necessarily alter my activity of tie-width judgment (although it might), for I might never have thought that tie-width judgments had to be scrubbed clean of any trace of arbitrariness in order to be successful. But our activity of moral
judgment, according to the rationalists, is significantly different. A successful moral judgment is supposed to be about what it is necessary to do, about what must be done. Moral judgments do aspire to be free of all traces of arbitrariness. We cannot, therefore, have any confidence in a moral judgment that is arbitrary in the way that a tie-width judgment is. According to the rationalists, however, sentimentalism implies that all our moral judgments are arbitrary in just that way. And it is on this basis that rationalists advance the incompatibility thesis, or the claim that sentimentalism implies the failure of our moral judgments.

V

Sentimentalists cannot deny, of course, that on their account moral judgments and judgments of fashion both originate in sentiments that might have been different. And they have to admit as well that there is a perspective one can adopt from which these two kinds of judgments look to be equally arbitrary, namely, a perspective in which the single distinction is between judgments that are necessary and non-arbitrary and judgments that are non-necessary and arbitrary—a perspective, that is, in which contingency implies arbitrariness. But does this mean that belief in sentimentalism is incompatible with confidence in the activity of moral judgment, as the rationalists maintain? Not necessarily. It depends upon whether the perspective from which all sentimentally-grounded judgments are equally arbitrary is also the perspective we aspire to when we make moral judgments, or whether the perspective we aspire to when we make moral judgments is one according to which some sentiments are sufficiently non-arbitrary. Rationalism, as I have been discussing it, assumes that the perspective we aspire to when we make moral judgments is one according to which all sentiments are equally arbitrary, while most sentimentalists assume that the perspective we aspire to draws a serviceable arbitrary-versus-non-arbitrary distinction within the class of sentiments.

Which side is right? Do our moral judgments aspire to a kind of non-arbitraryness that only necessary claims can achieve, as rationalists have it, or do they aspire to a less ambitious kind of non-arbitraryness that sentiments can ground? Need we lose confidence in the moral guidance of our reflective capacities upon coming to believe that they can produce moral judgments only in conjunction with our sentimental make-up, or can we maintain confidence in our reflective capacities while nonetheless believing that the only role they play in moral judgment is to pave the way for the experience of a sentiment? Will a moral judgment of ours always be
undermined in our own eyes if we come to realize that it is ultimately grounded in something contingent, or can we continue to stand behind a moral judgment even while acknowledging that we would have made a different judgment had we been raised differently?

I must say that I am dubious about giving a single definitive answer to this question, for it seems to me that the concept of morality is not determinate enough to force us one way or the other. That said, I do believe that the rationalist incompatibility thesis implies quite a bit more than we might initially think, and that once we realize how much the charge really does imply we are liable to draw further away from it. We are liable to think, that is, that the perspective we adopt when we make moral judgments is closer to one according to which some sentimentally-grounded judgments can be morally successful and further away from the perspective according to which all sentimentally-grounded judgments are equally arbitrary; or perhaps what we are liable to think is simply that it would be okay to make moral judgments from the perspective according to which some sentimentally-grounded judgments can be morally successful. I cannot argue the full case for that view here, but let me in closing make some brief suggestions about how that case might be made.

Sentimentalists could start by questioning whether the incompatibility thesis’s core idea of losing confidence in all of one’s moral judgments is even coherent. We are all familiar with the experience of losing confidence in particular moral judgments that we made in the past, but such losses of confidence seem themselves always to be grounded in present moral judgments of ours. I might, for instance, lose confidence in my earlier decision to fire someone upon coming to realize that I would not have made the same decision had my drive into work been more pleasant, but my loss of confidence in such a case seems itself to be grounded in (my confidence in) the present judgment that it is wrong to let the nature of one’s drive into work determine whether someone ought to keep or lose his job. Similarly, I might lose confidence in an entire field of judgments that I used to make—in the entire activity, say, of voting—but in those cases too my loss of confidence seems to be grounded in another moral judgment (in which I do currently have confidence)—in the judgment, say, that the election process is corrupt. Now the diagnosis sentimentalists might offer for our difficulty in imagining the loss of confidence in all of our present moral judgments is that moral judgments just are judgments in which we have confidence. For to have confidence in something is to have a
favorable sentiment towards it, but moral judgments (according to sentimentalists) just are judgments grounded in our favorable sentiments. To ask whether we can have confidence in our present moral judgments is, therefore, to ask an incoherent question, for we cannot imagine making moral judgments in which we do not have confidence. Sentimentalists might claim corroboration for this diagnosis by pointing out how lame it is to argue, as the rationalists suggest, that the incompatibility thesis can be established by showing that sentimentalism implies the arbitrariness of all our moral judgments. For to say that a judgment is arbitrary, sentimentalists might claim, is just another way of saying that the judgment is unjustified, that it is a judgment we are not currently making; it is not to support or offer a reason for the belief that the judgment is unjustified or for our not making it. Sentimentalists might thus conclude that the incompatibility thesis and the arguments for it are vitiated by the single rationalist mistake of thinking there are two things where in fact there is only one—by the mistake, that is, of thinking that in addition to a present moral judgment of ours there is such a thing as our confidence in it, and by the mistake of thinking that in addition to our dissent from a moral judgment there could be such a thing as our belief that that judgment is arbitrary. According to this sentimentalist response, then, the perspective presupposed by the rationalists, that from which it is possible to lose confidence in all of one’s moral judgments, is not a perspective that we rarely, or ought not to, adopt. It is, rather, not a perspective at all. We could not adopt it even if we tried. 18

This sentimentalist response implies, however, that everyone does make moral judgments, that whatever anyone has a kind of favorable sentiment towards ought to be counted as her moral convictions. Some might be willing to accept that consequence, but others will not. 19 In order to count as a moral judgment at all, those who will not accept that consequence will claim, a judgment must meet some general restrictions on content. A judgment completely outside the range of what most people typically think of as the content of morality, on this way of thinking, should not be seen as an idiosyncratic or incorrect moral judgment; it should be seen, rather, as a different—non-moral or amoral—kind of judgment altogether. It is possible, therefore, to imagine someone’s losing confidence in all her moral judgments, since it is possible to imagine someone’s abandoning completely the general contentful restrictions on conduct that are conceptually linked to morality itself. Indeed, some might claim that there are actual people who lack all confidence in the activity of moral judgment, people whose total lack of concern
and respect for their life and that of others forces us to conclude that they are beyond the pale of morality altogether.

However, sentimentalists can advance a strong response to the incompatibility thesis even while allowing that there are some contentious restrictions on morality and that consequently it is possible to lose confidence in all of one's moral judgments. This response consists of casting doubt on the idea that the cause of such a loss of confidence is ever a belief in sentimentalism. There is, sentimentalists will maintain, something dreadfully wrong with those people who are beyond the pale of morality, but a belief in moral sentimentalism is almost certainly not the cause. More likely, what is wrong with such amoral people is that they have not fully developed certain self-regarding or empathetic sentiments, and the cause of their stunted sentimental make-up is their early environment or genetic endowment. It is probably inaccurate, moreover, even to say of such people that they have lost confidence in the activity of making moral judgments, since we probably would not say that such people ever had confidence in that activity in the first place. So rationalists cannot point to just any old amoral person and expect to establish the incompatibility thesis. What rationalists must show, rather, is that people who had once conducted themselves in a manner consistent with a commitment to the activity of making moral judgments became amoralists upon becoming convinced of sentimentalism, and that people who currently conduct themselves in a manner consistent with a commitment to the activity of making moral judgments would turn into amoralists upon becoming convinced sentimentalists. But the idea that coming to believe in sentimentalism transforms typically morally confident people into amoralists strikes me as highly implausible (especially since there seem to be some actual people who appear both to believe in sentimentalism and to conduct themselves within the moral ballpark).20 I admit that I do not have a knockdown argument for this point. All I can do is ask you to consider the typically morally confident people you know and to ask yourself whether it is plausible to think that their conduct would veer drastically away from what is morally acceptable if they became convinced that moral judgments could not originate in reason alone. If it seems implausible that their conduct would change in this way, then we must conclude that the incompatibility thesis is implausible as well.21

Such a response to the incompatibility thesis need not, however, commit sentimentalists to the view that the rationalists are completely misguided in their contention that morals possess a kind of
necessity. For sentimentalists can and should acknowledge that there is a sense in which we think that there are certain actions whose non-arbitrariness is most naturally expressed by talk of what we must or have to do. But, sentimentalists could maintain, the modal clout such talk points to is of a type that sentimentally-grounded judgments can achieve.

Towards showing that the kind of non-arbitrariness moral judgments aspire to (which is often expressed by a must or have to) can be funded by sentiments, sentimentalists would do well to point out that our choices about matters concerning things such as friendships, marriages and careers are contingent, and that we know it. We are aware that such choices are determined in part by our sentimental make-up, and we can consequently imagine having made different choices, even upon full reflection. But that awareness does not preclude our thinking that some of our friendship, marriage and career choices are ones that we must or have to make. That awareness does not, more specifically, lead us to conclude that our friendship, marriage and career choices are as arbitrary as our choice to wear a tie of this width rather than that. Or put another, perhaps more accurate, way: whatever perspective it is we must adopt in order to see our friendship, marriage, career, and tie-width choices as all equally arbitrary, it is not the perspective we adopt when our friendship, marriage and career choices seem to us profoundly less arbitrary than our choice about what tie to wear. But while the rationalists’ incompatibility thesis (at least in so far as it rests on the argument from necessity) presupposes that when we make moral judgments we adopt the former perspective rather than the latter, it is pretty clear that most of the time in our daily lives we tend to adopt the latter perspective rather than the former (and if some of us don’t adopt the latter perspective more often it would probably be better if we did). Now the rationalists may embrace this conclusion since they may hold that in fact the moral perspective is very different from every other practical perspective. But anyone who is reluctant to distinguish so sharply between how one makes moral judgments and how one makes the other crucially important decisions in one’s life should find the rationalist view at this point unconvincing, if not somewhat troubling.

To constitute a full answer to the rationalists, however, the sentimentalist position cannot rest simply on the claim that in our everyday lives we often adopt a perspective from which sentimentally-grounded judgments look to possess a non-arbitraryness that can be expressed in terms suggesting a kind of necessity. Sentimentalists must go
on to provide an account of the kind of non-arbitrariness that such sentimentally-grounded judgments can possess, an account that is consistent both with a sentimentalist account of practical judgment and with everyday ideas about what one must or has to do.

Such a sentimentalist account might start with the claim that sentimentally-grounded judgments can be reflectively inescapable, that a sentimentally-grounded judgment can accord with a determination of the mind that no amount of further thought will unsettle. For it seems reasonable to hold that one’s judgments about what one must or has to do possess this feature of reflective inescapability. A sentimentalist account cannot end there, however. For as we’ve seen, tie-width judgments can be reflectively inescapable, but we tend to think such judgments are in a sense arbitrary and thus do not concern what we must or have to do.

What, then, can sentimentalisists legitimately add to their account in order to accommodate not only reflective inescapability but also the other elements of everyday thought about what must or has to be done? The answer lies in conceptions of self and identity. Sentimentalists could try to show that some of a person’s reflectively inescapable sentiments (but not all) are essential to that person’s conception of herself, that there are some sentiments that a person thinks of as constitutive of her identity. Sentimentalists could then go on to argue that judgments about actions described in terms of must’s and has’s are just those that are grounded in these essential-to-self sentiments.

Of course it is far from clear how sentimentalists might go about drawing adequate distinctions between run-of-the-mill sentiments and sentiments that are essential to one’s conception of oneself. In the works of Hume,22 Henry Frankfurt23 and Bernard Williams24 there are views on identity and practical deliberation that might provide sentimentalists with at least some of the materials needed to draw those distinctions. But I cannot pursue those topics any further here. I hope, though, that in this final section I have given some indication of the direction such a sentimentalist pursuit of non-arbitrariness might take. I hope, as well, that in this and the previous sections I have convinced you of the importance of such a pursuit. Convincing you of that has been the chief goal of this paper.25

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NOTES

1. To have "confidence" in a moral judgment, as I am using the term here, is to think that one is justified in making that moral judgment—to think that one has adequate grounds for thinking it is true. So to lose confidence in a moral judgment is to come to think that one lacks adequate grounds to think that it is true. To believe that a moral judgment is false will, then, imply the loss of confidence in that moral judgment; but to lose confidence in a moral judgment will not imply the belief that the moral judgment is false, since a moral judgment one lacks adequate grounds to believe is true one may also lack adequate grounds to believe is false. Kant believes that if we came to believe that sentimentalism is true, we would then also come to believe that our moral judgments are false and so by implication would lose confidence in our moral judgments; while Balguy and Price believe that if we came to believe that sentimentalism is true, then we would come to believe that we lack adequate grounds for thinking any of our moral judgments are true, which is to say that we would lose confidence in our moral judgments but is not to say that we would come to think that we have adequate grounds for thinking that our moral judgments are false.

2. Two contemporary rationalists who have argued for what I am calling the incompatibility thesis are Christine Korsgaard, in "The Sources of Normativity," The Tanner Lectures (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994) (see especially lecture two), and Michael Smith, in The Moral Problem (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994).

3. I will focus on these three rationalists because they pretty much cover the first, second and third third of the eighteenth century and because when they advance the incompatibility thesis and the argument from necessity they do so as explicit attacks on the sentimentalism of Hutcheson and, in the case of Price at least, Hume. That is not to say that a commitment to these positions surfaced in rationalist thought only in the eighteenth century. Indeed, all the seventeenth-century rationalists who believed that morality was demonstrable would have stood behind the argument from necessity and the incompatibility thesis, and in the works of Ralph Cudworth, for one, we can find versions of these positions that are at least as ardent as those in Balguy, Price and Kant.

4. Kant's considered opinion was that the distinction that he draws at Groundwork 109-10 between explicitly egoistic views (such as Hobbes's) and seemingly non-egoistic moral sense views (such as Hutcheson's) was at bottom illusory or at least very insignificant, since he elsewhere contends that "[a]ll material practical principles are, as such, of one and the same kind and belong under the general principle of self-love or one's own happiness" (Kant 1956, 20).


7. See Hume’s discussions of sympathy throughout Books II and III of the *Treatise* (e.g., 316 ff., 363 ff., 499, 575 ff.)

8. There are, of course, many important distinctions to be made between the rationalism of Kant, on the one hand, and the rationalism of Balguy and Price, on the other, and I don’t mean to suggest that Kant’s highly sophisticated system of ethics can in the end be reduced to the simpler views of Balguy and Price. Balguy and Price, to take just one example, repeatedly assimilate moral judgments to mathematical and logical claims, while Kant’s distinction between theoretical and practical reason is a clear rejection of such an assimilation. Despite the crucial differences, however, Kant is committed to the same general form of the incompatibility thesis and the argument from necessity that Balguy and Price advance, even if there is in Kant a great deal more than that as well.

9. Kant, for instance, writes, “But just as there must be principles in a metaphysics of nature for applying those highest universal principles of a nature in general to objects of experience, a metaphysics of morals cannot dispense with principles of application, and we shall often have to take as our object the particular nature of human beings, which is cognized only by experience, in order to show in it what can be inferred from universal moral principles. . . . That is to say, in effect, that a metaphysics of morals cannot be based upon anthropology but can still be applied to it” (*Metaphysics of Morals* 1996, 10). See also Price, 169 ff.

10. Price writes, “There are undoubtedly a variety of moral principles and maxims, which, to gain assent, need only to be understood: And I see not why such propositions as these, ‘gratitude is due to benefactors; reverence is due to our Creator; it is right to study our own happiness; an innocent being ought not to be absolutely miserable; it is wrong to take from another the fruit of his labour,’ and others of like kind, may not be laid down and used as axioms, the truth of which appears as irresistible as the truth of those which are the foundation of Geometry” (Price, 168–9).

11. A common worry about this position is that any general moral judgment that rationalists propose will face a dilemma: either it will be necessary but not determinate enough to imply particular moral judgments (perhaps because it is tautological) or it will be determinate enough to imply particular moral judgments but will not be necessary. The worry, in other words, is that a moral judgment can provide substantive deliberative guidance or be necessary but not—as the rationalists require—both.

12. Balguy writes, “If I should say, that all Geometrical Truths are naturally and necessarily assented to by the Reason of all Men; few, I am persuaded, would object to the Proposition. And yet Morality, however, neglected was always more generally known and considered than Geometry. Whoever has a real Perception of any Truth, must unavoidably assent to it as such: but if he had never examined it, never taken it into his Thoughts; however clear and evident it might be in itself, it would be to him as nothing” (Balguy 1734, 300). Kant writes, “The ordinary reason of mankind also agrees with [the universal law formulation of the categorical
imperative] completely in its practical judgements and always has the aforesaid principle before its eyes” (Kant 1964, 70). See also Price, 168–9.

13. Some might contend that this rationalist claim that people might lose their confidence in moral judgments once they start believing a philosophical theory (sentimentalism) is just highly implausible from the start, flying in the face of everything we know about moral psychology. I tend to think that this anti-rationalist contention has much to speak for it, and indeed suggest it in section V of this paper and in my "Reflexivity and Justification in Hume’s Moral Theory" (Canadian Journal of Philosophy 26, No. 2 [June 1996], pp. 246–54). In this section, however, I am trying to make the best case I can for that rationalist claim and in so doing show that the claim, while ultimately unsuccessful, is perhaps not quite as implausible as it might initially seem to some.

14. I will mean by “arbitrary” roughly what the O.E.D. gives as the third definition of the word, namely, “Derived from mere opinion or preference; not based on the nature of things; hence, capricious, uncertain, varying”—the crucial idea being that of an arbitrary judgment being one that is determined by something (such as the opinion or preference of a spectator) irrelevant to the nature of the thing being judged (such as an act in and of itself). This definition probably best captures contemporary English use of the word and was current at the time of Balguy and Price as well. In philosophical works at the time of Balguy and Price, however, the word “arbitrary” was also sometimes used in a more focused way, referring specifically to voluntarist views. I think, though, that even when Balguy and Price use the word “arbitrary” in their discussion of voluntarism they should be seen as also having in mind the definition given above. For the rationalists thought that voluntarists and sentimentalists both make just the same mistake of claiming that morality is grounded in “mere preference,” the only difference being that voluntarists claim that morality is grounded in the “mere preference” of God while sentimentalists claim that it is grounded in the “mere preference” of humans (and in the case of Hutcheson there is not even that difference, since Hutcheson thinks that humans have the preferences they do only because of the “mere preference” of God).

15. It might seem to be a rather easy task for rationalists such as Balguy and Price to establish that sentimentally-grounded moral judgments are arbitrary. For according to the rationalism of Balguy and Price (which grows out of the seventeenth century antivoluntarist positions, most notably Cudworth’s), every action has an essential moral nature in the same way that every shape has an essential geometric nature. So just as it is impossible for something to be a triangle and its interior angles not to add up to a hundred and eighty degrees, so too is it impossible for an action to be the killing of an innocent person and not be morally wrong. And this essential moral nature of an action is as independent of human sentiments as is the essential geometric nature of a triangle independent of human sentiments. A sentimentally-grounded judgment about an action will, then, always be arbitrary under our definition of the word, since that judgment will be based on something (the sentiments of the
person making the judgment) that is distinct from the essential nature of the thing (the action) being judged. It is not obvious, however, that this rather easy way of undermining all sentimentally-grounded moral judgments is true to the concept of morality implicit in the activity of moral judgment as it is engaged in in everyday life (which the confidence-only-in-necessity claim is supposed to be). That is because while everyone will agree that a judgment not based on the nature of the thing being judged (i.e., an arbitrary judgment) is unjustified, it is not obvious that everyday practice implies the idea that what is being morally judged is something that has moral properties that are essential to it in the same way that geometric properties are essential to shapes. What I want to do in the rest of this section, thus, is explore how the rationalists could try to argue that claims of arbitrariness made within the everyday activity of moral judgment contain a commitment to confidence-only-in-necessity claim which undermines all sentimentally-grounded moral judgments. I want to explore, that is, how the rationalists could try to show that everyday ideas about moral arbitrariness imply their seemingly non-everyday idea that we can have confidence in a moral judgment only we think it is necessary.

16. The conviction that the principles grounding true moral judgments must defy explanation in terms of past events seems to underlie Kant’s insistence on a division between “practical anthropology” and “a metaphysic of morals” that has been “scrupulously cleansed of everything empirical” (Kant 1964, 56). Kant is not claiming that we can determine what ought to be done without any empirical knowledge, but rather that the study of morality must begin with a general ought-claim that is such that our commitment to it does not admit of any kind of event-explanation. Thus Kant writes, “When applied to man [moral philosophy] does not borrow in the slightest from acquaintance with him (in anthropology), but gives him laws a priori as a rational being” (Kant 1964, 57). Similarly, Price maintains that “by VIRTUE is now meant ABSOLUTE VIRTUE, or that RIGHTNESS, PROPRIETY, or FITNESS of certain actions, which all own in some instances or other, and which can be explained no other way, than by desiring every one to reflect on what, in such instances, he is conscious of. . . . [Right] denotes a real character of actions, or something true of them; something necessary and immutable and independent of our perceptions, like equality, difference, proportion, or connection; and, therefore, that no other account is to be given, why such and such actions are right, than why the natures of things are what they are . . . .” (Price, 233). The same commitment to the event-explanation-defying character of the foundation of true moral judgments animates Ralph Cudworth’s attempt to establish that moral ideas are innate, an attempt that Price cites approvingly (Price, 20). Price’s own attempt to show that “the source of our moral ideas” is “our INTUITION” seems intended to establish as well that true moral judgments are founded on a faculty that cannot be explained (Price, 41 ff.). See also Price’s discussion of how our “ideas of right and wrong,” or “the grand lines and primary principles of morality . . . deeply wrought into our hearts” are unaffected by “custom, education, and example” (Price, 172–3).
17. See Simon Blackburn’s “Morals and Modals” (Essays in Quasi-Realism [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993]) for an account of necessity and contingency that dovetails with my suggestion that we think of necessary judgments as those our assent to which defies event-explanation.

18. Hutcheson seems to have this kind of response in mind when he writes, “[N]one can apply moral Attributes to the very Faculty of perceiving moral Qualities; or call his moral Sense morally Good or Evil, any more than he calls the Power of Tasting, sweet or bitter; or of Seeing, strait or crooked, white or black” (Hutcheson 1969, 237).

19. Falk (Ought, Reasons and Morality [Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986]) presents a compelling case for the view that there is no conceptual restraint on the content of morality, while Foot (Virtues and Vices [Berkeley: California University Press, 1978]) presents a compelling case for the view that the content of morality does have some conceptual restraints.

20. The argument I hint at here is developed by Foot (op. cit.). See Michael Smith’s “Dispositional Theories of Value” (Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume 1989) for an opposing view.

21. Rationalists might try to rebut this response by claiming that even if a typically morally confident person says she believes in sentimentalism it still cannot be the case that she does believe in it, at least not when her commitment to morality is truly engaged. Perhaps such a person advances arguments for sentimentalism in philosophical conversation and perhaps she really has convinced herself that when she confidently makes moral judgments she does not believe that they originate in reason alone. But that just proves that she is confused about what she herself believes. It just proves that she has not clearly and fully analyzed her own moral state of mind. But this rationalist rebuttal presupposes the incompatibility thesis instead of constituting an argument for it. And while I do not deny that a typically morally confident person who says she believes in sentimentalism may be confused about her own moral state of mind, I also think it is possible that she is not confused. And rationalists can deny this latter possibility, I think, only at the risk of making unfalsifiable the claim that lies at the heart of their account of our everyday moral consciousness—only, that is, by making unfalsifiable their claim that the everyday moral consciousness of each of us is deeply informed by the belief that the foundation of morality is purely rational.


23. In The Importance of What We Care About (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).


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