

Moral Psychology // Spring 2021

Handout 8

Self-love and benevolence: Butler, Hobbes, Mandeville

OBJECTS OF ATTITUDES. Butler's main argument is relatively straightforward. It is based on the distinction between the (intentional) objects of self-love, on one hand, and all other desires and attitudes ('affections, passions, and appetites'), on the other. Man has desire for his *own* happiness—the motive of self-love. This motive never seeks anything external, it rather seeks phenomenal experiences of a certain character, namely, pleasure. External things are means for generating those experiences. 4

But all other desires and attitudes are aimed at external objects. This is proved by the fact that there is 'suitableness' between desires and their objects. If desires were aimed at experiences (pleasure), then we couldn't have explained why one object generates more pleasure than another. That is: Desires are aimed at the objects that are suitable, are likely, to generate pleasure. 5 6

This distinction we find in language. We distinguish between means and ends. A hedonist (egoistic hedonist) says: 7

(8-1) All actions are properly directed at my pleasure.

He still recognises the difference between:

- (8-2) a. I want this cake. The reason I want it is my pleasure.
b. ?? I want this pleasure. (Pointing at the cake)

The 'principle of action' is aimed at an external object, and then justified by reference to pleasure/happiness that are the proper objects of self-love. Hence self-love and regular desires/attitudes are two entirely distinct categories. 8

SELF-LOVE AND HAPPINESS. Butler then argues that self-love itself can't be identified with happiness. As just said, self-love is a desire for happiness, but it isn't happiness itself—any more than a desire for a cake is the cake itself or its possession. 9

In fact, you may think that self-love isn't *another* desire at all, or perhaps that it is a desire of a different order: its presence explains our motivation, but we can't be directly motivated by self-love itself:

- (8-3) {What are you doing?}
a. I am trying to get a cake. (= I am motivated by the desire of that cake.)
b. ?? I am trying to get happy/to get a pleasure. (= I am motivated by self-love.)

That's not how Butler puts the point, however. Self-love is another desire alright, but it is often misleading. Focussing on your happiness may prevent in fact achieving that happiness. It is a better strategy to ignore ('disengage' from) your happiness and behave altruistically. This is a surer way to bring about your happiness, eventually. 9

SUMMARY. There are, then, two claims that emerge from this discussion. There can be no contradiction between egoism and altruism, since there is no competition between self-love and other desires, including benevolent desires to benefit others. Secondly, pursuing other-regarding desires is a more effective strategy of obtaining happiness than focussing on your own happiness (which, in any event, seems somewhat pathological, if possible at all). 19

How do these claims fare with actual egoists and (egoistic) hedonists? Not too well, I think. Let's see with Hobbes and Mandeville.

REMARKS ON HOBBS. Human motivation consists in the continuous and incessant production of desires. The object of these desires is what seems to the agents to be good for themselves. And what seems good for them, fundamentally, is survival and contentment. At least in a situation of scarcity, also in the condition of the pursuit of honour (whether explicable in terms of scarcity or not), the desires of different agents will clash. Namely, more than one agent will desire the same material resource, and often, or typically, agents will want honour and reputation at the expense of others.

The emerging conflict may be resolved by mutual help and cooperation. By the proper employment of reason people may arrange their actions in accordance with certain rules (natural laws) that tend to peace and cooperation. Importantly, the ultimate reason for any helping and pro-social action is the same egoistic desire of contentment.

Hobbes' reasoning is that the long-term goals of survival and contentment are best served by other-regarding desires tending to trust and cooperation.

Is this something that an egoist should dispute? Well, 'long-term'—how long? And where is the guarantee that other-*dis*regarding desires can't serve the same purpose, sometimes? Elsewhere Hobbes argues that such an egoist takes unacceptable, irrational risks. But this is unpersuasive: the egoist need only take calculated risks, which all of us take anyway.

REMARKS ON MANDEVILLE. Mandeville's view is interestingly different from Hobbes. Here are its main elements (page references are to the numbers on the margins):

Egoism: People are driven by selfish desires. Praise by others and sensitivity to contempt are presumed to be among them, too. 27

Problem of co-existence: Egoism makes it difficult or impossible to ensure peaceful co-existence. 28

Flattery: Certain 'Lawgivers' and 'wise men' hit upon a solution: people should be flattered to control their selfish desires and to work for the public good. These Lawgivers are best understood as evolutionary forces (of uncertain nature) that enable this change. 28–29

Co-existence built on flattery: The 'Savage Man was broke', since it was impossible to ignore the opinion of others and to indulge one's (selfish) appetites. 33

Roots of morality: The 'very worst of the people' soon learned to preach sociability in public and to gratify their appetites in private. Thus they 'agreed with the rest' to call gratification of appetites 'vice' and their control for the sake of common existence 'virtue'. 34