

AN INQUIRY INTO THE ORIGINAL OF OUR
IDEAS OF BEAUTY AND VIRTUE

NATURAL LAW AND
ENLIGHTENMENT CLASSICS

Knud Haakonssen
General Editor



Francis Hutcheson

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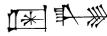
*An Inquiry
into the Original
of Our Ideas of
Beauty and Virtue
in Two Treatises*

REVISED EDITION

Francis Hutcheson

Edited and with an Introduction by
Wolfgang Leidhold

*The Collected Works and Correspondence
of Francis Hutcheson*



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INTRODUCTION

Liberty and Happiness

The political dimension of liberty is at least twofold: civil liberties and independence. The former is a matter of the political order of a country; the latter, of freedom from foreign domination. Liberty and happiness can be related to each other as they were in the third section of the “Virginia Bill of Rights,” from 6 June 1776:

That government is or ought to be instituted for the common benefit, protection and security of the people, nation or community; of all the various modes and forms of government, that is best which is capable of producing the greatest degree of happiness and safety and is most effectually secured against the danger of maladministration; and that when any government shall be found inadequate or contrary to these purposes, a majority of the community has an indubitable, inalienable and indefeasible right to reform, alter or abolish it, in such manner as shall be judged most conducive to the public weal.

The preceding section puts forward a short argument: The right to reform, alter, or abolish government is founded on the judgment of whether such government is adequate or contrary to its main purpose, namely the greatest degree of happiness and safety of the community. The argument has a philosophical background. The criterion of “producing the greatest degree of happiness” is part of the principal maxim of utilitarian ethics. The right of resistance against inadequate government, on the other hand, is part of the liberal creed. In the eighteenth century the Scottish philosopher Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), in his *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (London,

1725), linked the two sides of the argument for the first time.¹ There he even coined the phrase, “That action is best, which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers.”²

Hutcheson’s philosophy became part of the ideas that formed the American polity. In the eighteenth century his books were imported to America and his philosophy was well known through his students and learned visitors to Scotland—among them was Benjamin Franklin in 1759. Hutcheson’s ideas even became part of the colonial curriculum.³ The *Inquiry*, which is published here in a new edition, was the book that established Hutcheson’s reputation as a philosopher.

The Argument of the *Inquiry*

Already in this early work, Hutcheson detailed some of his political ideas.⁴ However, his main task was examining the foundations of his aesthetic, moral, and political philosophy. This was done in two treatises, one dealing with the principles of aesthetics,⁵ the other with those of ethics and, to some extent, their political consequences.⁶ In both treatises

1. For Hutcheson’s biography, see W. R. Scott, *Francis Hutcheson, His Life, Teaching and Position in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900; reprint, New York: A. M. Kelley, 1966). Also see the brief overview of Hutcheson’s early life and writings in the editor’s introduction to Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (1728), ed. Aaron Garrett (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003).

2. The formula was first used by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in a critical remark on Samuel Cocceji’s thesis *De Principio Juris Naturalis Unico, Vero, et Adaequato* (Frankfurt: Schrey/Hartmann, 1699); see Joachim Hruschka, pp. 166–69.

3. For the impact of Hutcheson’s philosophy in Europe and America, see the introduction to Hutcheson, *Über den Ursprung unserer Ideen von Schönheit und Tugend*, ed. Wolfgang Leidhold (Hamburg: Meiner, 1986), pp. xi–xiv.

4. Especially in the second and the third editions of the *Inquiry*, 1726 and 1729, respectively.

5. On Hutcheson’s aesthetic philosophy, see the works and articles of Peter Kivy, Caroline Korsmeyer, E. Michael, and M. Strasser, listed in “References and Further Reading” (p. xix of this volume).

6. For discussion of Hutcheson’s central ideas, see “References and Further Reading” (p. xix of this volume), especially the works and articles of Giovanni de Crescenzo, William K. Frankena, Knud Haakonssen, Peter Kivy, Wolfgang Leidhold, David Fate Norton, D. D. Raphael, Jane Rendall, and William Robert Scott; still

the structure of the argument is similar: (1) Our ideas have their origin in our perceptions and are received by senses. (2) For different perceptions we have different senses. (3) Perceptions are founded in certain qualities of the objects perceived. (4) These qualities we can describe in a maxim or formula. Hutcheson's theory in both treatises therefore is a complex of three related components: a subjective sense, an objective foundation, and an analytical formula. Hutcheson presents the outline of his theory of perception in the first treatise.

The First Treatise

Hutcheson's theory of perception starts with the ideas of John Locke.⁷ For Locke all materials of reason and knowledge come "from experience" and our senses are "the first step and degree towards knowledge, and the inlet of all the materials of it."⁸ Hutcheson accordingly defines different senses as the powers "of receiving . . . different Perceptions" (I. I. §§ I, II) and maintains that we also acquire the material for our aesthetic and ethical knowledge by some sort of perception. However, what is the specific quality we perceive in aesthetic perceptions? Here Hutcheson relies on Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury's analysis of aesthetic perception is based on the Platonic concept of *form* (*forma* is the Latin version of the Greek Platonic term *idea*). Beauty then is the "outward form" of things, reflecting the "inward form" of some "forming power."⁹ Accordingly Hutcheson defines beauty as a "form" or as "Figures . . . in which there is Uniformity amidst Variety" (I. II. § III).

Hutcheson implies that form and uniformity cannot be perceived by the normal senses but by a special sense only. Therefore he expands the

valuable as a basic bibliography is T. E. Jessop. For a wider British context, see Isabel Rivers.

7. Locke is mentioned in the *Inquiry*, I. I. § VII. Here and in the following the *Inquiry* is quoted by treatise, section, and article; for example, "I. I. § VII" means first treatise, first section, article seven.

8. John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II. I. § 2; see II. IX. § 15.

9. See J. V. Arregni and P. Arnau, "Shaftesbury: Father and Critic of Modern Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 34 (1994): 350–62.

notion of experience beyond the confines of the ordinary five senses. *Form* or *uniformity* then is the particular *quality in objects* that is the “Foundation or Occasion of the Ideas of Beauty among Men” (I. II. §§ I, II). Beauty is our perception or knowledge of this objective quality, and in accord with his definition of “sense” as the power of perceiving these objective qualities, he assumes a special *sense of beauty*. This sense is but one of a group of “internal senses,” which include among others the “good Ear” or “sense of harmony” (I. VI. § IX). The formula by which the objective form in things themselves can be described is, as already noted, “uniformity amidst variety.” With these words Hutcheson paraphrases Shaftesbury’s concept of beauty. As in his analysis of moral actions, Hutcheson thinks that aesthetic phenomena are capable of a mathematical analysis, which he sketches in his study of “original or absolute beauty” (title of I. II.).

After delineating his theory of aesthetic knowledge, Hutcheson in the remaining chapters of the first treatise develops a general aesthetic theory. This theory of beauty is not limited to a theory of art but extends to a general, almost cosmological theory. This becomes clear when we look at his basic distinction of original or absolute beauty from comparative or relative beauty at the end of the first section. Absolute beauty we “perceive in Objects without comparison to any thing external, of which the Object is suppos’d an Imitation, or Picture” (I. I. § XVI). Examples of such beauty are the works of nature (such as heaven and earth, plants and animals); the harmony of music; some works of art, when their beauty, as in architecture or gardening, is not an imitation of something else. Even theorems, such as those in mathematics, can in the absolute sense be beautiful. Relative beauty is “founded on a Conformity, or a kind of Unity between the Original and the Copy” (I. IV. § I). Instances here are poetry and painting and the creation as a whole—since in the beauty of the effects it reflects the design and wisdom of its cause, which is God the Father as the Creator (I. V.).

It is the general theory of perception as developed in the first treatise that forms the basis of the similar argument in the second. We may assume that Hutcheson wanted first to establish the idea of additional senses in a field that was not as controversial as that of moral philosophy.

The Second Treatise

The moral controversy is found right in the title of the book. In the first edition we read that Hutcheson wants to defend Shaftesbury's ideas against the author of the *Fable of the Bees*, that is, Mandeville. The two names reflect the clash between the "benevolent" and the "selfish" system. The first position argues that men have by nature moral principles, the second that these principles are but a political invention that is socially useful and based only on self-love or self-interest. Shaftesbury taught that *social affections* were the foundation of morals and that a *moral sense* was the origin of our moral ideas.¹⁰ Where Shaftesbury speaks of "social affections" as the foundation of morals, Hutcheson prefers the Christian concept of "love" as "benevolence." The logical structure of the second treatise is similar to the first. Again we can discern three major components: an objective foundation, which here is benevolence; a particular sense, which is the moral sense; and the analytical formula of "the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers."

LOVE OR BENEVOLENCE AS THE FOUNDATION
OF THE MORAL GOOD

In the second treatise, Hutcheson wants to establish the notion of a moral sense as the "Original of our Ideas of . . . Virtue" and love or benevolence as the particular quality we perceive in virtue:

The Affections which are of most Importance in Morals, are Love and Hatred: All the rest seem but different Modifications of these two original affections. (II. II. § II)

Since Hutcheson wanted to follow Locke's theory of knowledge (as in the first treatise), he had to analyze love or benevolence in accordance

10. See Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Philip Ayres, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), I, pp. 55–57, 62ff., 93–101, 196–274. Also see Stanley Grean. The term *moral sense* was first used by Thomas Burnet, a student of Ralph Cudworth, in his discussion of John Locke, cf. Ernest Tuveson.

with Locke's ideas. According to Locke, all materials of experience consist either of simple ideas or of complex ideas, which are composed of simple ideas. Complex ideas can be real or they can be fictitious (being put together by the imagination or by reason). However, neither imagination nor reason can invent simple ideas. Therefore, only simple ideas necessarily represent something real. If Hutcheson thinks benevolence is the objective foundation of morals, he must show what simple ideas constitute it.

Locke had defined love by the simple ideas of pleasure and pain.¹¹ Love for him is the subjective pleasure of something and is identical with self-love. This definition of love is compatible only with the selfish system. Hutcheson wants to avoid just that. Therefore he distinguishes two versions of "good" and "evil," that is, natural and moral good or evil. A natural good is perceived only in inanimate beings. This perception is one of advantage or disadvantage, of pleasure or pain. A moral good is perceived in rational agents since "they study the interest, and desire the Happiness of other Beings." Our moral relationship with rational agents then is twofold: (1) a moral perception and (2) a moral affection or desire. The moral perception is generally called "approbation" or "disapprobation"; the desire is generally named "love" and "benevolence" or "dislike" and "hate" (II. Introduction; II. I. § I; II).

Hutcheson defines love by the "simple idea of desire." In the first edition of the *Inquiry* the terminology is not yet quite consistent; refinements are added later.¹² In the *Essay* he defines love as the "desire" for the happiness of others and addresses *desire* as a simple idea (*Essay*, p. 64).¹³ In contrast to Locke,¹⁴ Hutcheson considers desire to be an act of the will. This is consistent with the Christian idea of love. Love in

11. See Locke, *Essay*, II. XX. § 4.

12. Here the reader is confronted with an irritating number of terms used to describe love: affection, intention, sentiment, design, disposition, inclination, motive, determination, instinct, even passion, see *Inquiry* (first edition 1725), 104, 107, 112, 119, 131, 137, 143; "passion": 132, 134, 141, 175ff.

13. The same argument is added to the third and the fourth editions of the *Inquiry* (II. II. § IV and § V).

14. Locke, *Essay*, II. XXI. §§ 28ff.

the Christian sense of *benevolence* is not an emotion or a feeling, but an act of the will.¹⁵ Otherwise, the words of the Sermon on the Mount—“Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 19:19)—would become a very strange commandment: a feeling cannot be commanded. A contemporary Christian author, Richard Cumberland (1631–1718), knew this very well.¹⁶

THE MORAL SENSE AS THE
ORIGIN OF MORAL IDEAS

While benevolence is the foundation of the moral good, the moral sense is the source of moral ideas, of approbation and disapprobation. Hutcheson concedes that the moral sense is a “secret sense” (II. Introduction; II. I. § III). That means the existence of such a sense is not immediately known and calls for an indirect proof. On the basis of his theory of perception he demonstrates that there are distinct moral perceptions and concludes that there must be a distinct sense:

since the Definition agrees to it, viz. a Determination of the Mind, to receive any Idea from the Presence of an Object which occurs to us, independent on our Will. (II. I. § I)

15. On the Christian idea of love see M. C. D’Arcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944); J. Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1947); V. Warnach, “Agápe, Not Eros—or Caritas,” *Anglican Theological Review*, 37 (1955): 67–73; most comprehensive: Ceslaus Spicq, *Agapè dans le Nouveau Testament: Analyse de textes*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gabalda, 1958–59). A good introduction is C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 21st ed. (Glasgow: Collins, 1981).

16. See R. Cumberland, *A Treatise of the Law of Nature* (London: Phillips, Knapton, 1727; first edition in Latin, London, 1672), 42. For Hutcheson the conceptual situation was rather complicated, and it took him a while to clarify it. Finally, in the fourth edition of the *Inquiry* the definition of love is given the most precise wording. Here Hutcheson identifies the “Desire of the Good of Others” with the Aristotelian “ὄρεξις βουλευτική,” translating it as a “settled Disposition of the Will, or a constant Determination, or desire to act . . . , or a fixed Affection toward a certain Manner of Conduct.” Since the foundation of morals sometimes had been called an “instinct,” he at the same time defines “instinct” as an “Essential or Natural Disposition of the Will, an Affectionate Determination” (p. 195).

For Hutcheson, the particular moral perception is approbation. We perceive a “moral good” when a person acts from benevolence, and this “(excites) . . . Approbation or Perception of moral Excellence.” The “natural good,” on the other hand, raises the “Desire of Possession toward the good Object.” Hutcheson emphasizes that approbation should not be mixed up with the “Opinion of Advantage,” and later on throughout the first and the following chapters he strengthens his position with a number of instances. That the perception of approbation or moral excellence is different from other perceptions is for Hutcheson a matter of evidence.¹⁷ Evidence for him seems to be a proof from experience, which cannot be supported by other sufficient reasons (II. I. § I).

THE GREATEST HAPPINESS FOR
THE GREATEST NUMBERS

To be sure, the moral quality of actions is not the same in all cases. Sometimes we approve one act more than another, or we may have to choose between different options. To clarify the difference, we have to analyze the object of perception, that is, the moral quality itself. In this case we would make a judgment about moral quality. This is what Hutcheson does with his maxim of the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers. In the third section Hutcheson introduces the formula:

that Action is best, which procures the greatest Happiness for the greatest Numbers; and that, worst, which, in like manner, occasions Misery.
(II. III. § VIII)

The formula is based on the moral sense, the objective moral quality, and a rational procedure, namely a comparison of the varying moral qualities of actions. The subsequent judgment is based on the moral sense that still performs a leading role. In the earlier editions, the presentation of the maxim was followed by a number of mathematical algorithms that, however, are omitted in the fourth edition. Hutcheson states in the preface to the latter that he had left out the mathematical expressions since they “appear’d useless, and were disagreeable to some

17. Hutcheson uses the word *evidence*, for example, in *Inquiry* II. I. § I.

Readers” (4th ed., Preface, p. xxi; see Preface, note 38, in the Textual Notes of the present edition). The term “happiness” is defined as a “natural good.” To be sure, the greatest good turns out to be benevolence itself (II. III. § XV) or the “Possession of good moral Qualities” (II. VI. § I). The greatest happiness for Hutcheson cannot be found in wealth and external pleasures, but virtue is “the chief Happiness in the Judgment of all Mankind” (II. VI. § II).

POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES:
HAPPINESS AND LIBERTY

Hutcheson’s moral philosophy has a political perspective.¹⁸ This becomes clear in phrases like the “common good” or “public interest” that he uses throughout the *Inquiry*. Especially in its final chapter he treats the basic questions of political order. His main subjects are the corruption of human nature, prudence, rights, and the form of government. The political problem emerges right from the center of Hutcheson’s moral philosophy. Since virtue is the highest form of happiness, and virtue is based on benevolence and benevolence in turn on the will, then only people who can exert their will autonomously (in other words, who are free in a political sense) can be happy.¹⁹ Liberty therefore becomes a central political idea. At the same time, liberty can provide difficulties: it may happen that people do not follow the path of virtue.

What shall we do if the moral foundation is weak and if the moral ideas are insufficient? The argument is based on the insight that not all citizens may be virtuous all the time. Although the moral sense and all good reasons may point toward a virtuous life, human nature is open to corruption because men are free. Man is moved by two opposing principles, love and self-love, and is free to follow either. Therefore liberty

18. See Wolfgang Leidhold, *Ethik und Politik bei Francis Hutcheson* (Freiburg, Munich: Alber, 1985), especially chaps. 6–10.

19. See Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, 2 vols. (London, 1755), vol. 1, 102, and his *Synopsis metaphysicae* (1744), II. 2. 3, translated in *Logic, Metaphysics, and the Natural Sociability of Mankind*, ed. James Moore and Michael Silverthorne (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006), 129–30. On love and free will, see *Ethik und Politik*, 72–125.

and happiness sometimes counteract each other. It is difficult to determine the prevailing motive, benevolence or self-love, particularly in public life (II. III. § XII). The polity therefore can be based not on good intentions but on good results. Government can rest only on *prudence*, not on moral perceptions. The importance of prudence as opposed to moral reflections is typical for both the republican tradition of James Harrington and the Whig tradition, and Hutcheson was close to both.²⁰ Accordingly, the moral sense must be supplemented by an external motive to “beneficent Actions . . . for the publick Good . . . to counterballance those apparent Motives of Interest.” This external motive is “a Law with Sanctions” (II. VII. § I). For Hutcheson the transfer and restriction of liberty therefore is the central question of political order and of the limits of government:

Men have [the Right] to constitute Civil Government, and to subject their alienable Rights to the Disposal of their Governours, under such Limitations as their Prudence suggests. And as far as the People have subjected their Rights, so far their Governours have an external Right at least, to dispose of them, as their Prudence shall direct, for attaining the Ends of their Institution; and no further. (II. VII. § VIII)

To be acceptable, liberty and its restriction must be in balance with happiness. If a government assumes all rights from its people and neglects the “publick Good of the State” altogether, it is called despotism. For Hutcheson a “Despotick Government” is directly inconsistent with his idea of a civil government (II. VII. § X). With despotism, liberty and happiness are at stake. In such cases, Hutcheson advocates a right of resistance (II. VII. § X). And later on he argued that this is “*When it is that colonies may turn independent.*”²¹

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20. See Caroline Robbins and Charles Blitzer, *An Immortal Commonwealth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), and J. G. A. Pocock, ed., *The Political Works of James Harrington* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

21. Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, 2 vols. (Glasgow: Foulis, 1755), vol. 2, 308.

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NOTE ON THE TEXT

This volume is the revised edition of Hutcheson's *Inquiry into the Original of Beauty and Virtue* prepared for the series Natural Law and Enlightenment Classics. The first edition was sold out by mid-2006. Since then, more variants among the four different editions from the author's lifetime have been discovered, misprints and errata of the first edition have been compiled, and the entire text has been revised and edited anew. In the paragraphs following, an asterisk (*) indicates the additional versions that have now been taken into account.

The Editions

During Hutcheson's lifetime, four different editions of the *Inquiry into the Original of Beauty and Virtue* were published. These editions are chronologically referred to as A, B, C, and D. The texts of B, C, and D not only contain corrections but also introduce alterations and additions by the author. A separate booklet titled *Alterations and Additions* was published in 1726 "by the Author" (i.e., Hutcheson); it is listed below (after A3) by this title. The present edition is based on the second edition (B) from 1726; it presents the variants of the other editions and of the aforementioned *Alterations and Additions* in a critical apparatus. The second edition was chosen for its philosophical relevance. Although the later editions display further additions and corrections, these are mostly of philological importance.

Several *versions* of the first edition (A) and fourth edition (D) exist. In the eighteenth century it was common practice to intervene in the process of printing to correct misprints and to introduce changes. In many cases some copies containing uncorrected sheets or leaves were sold