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Rationalism vs. Sentimentalism: Reviewing Price's *Review*

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ABSTRACT. This paper revisits Richard Price's *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* (1757/1787). Price was a defender of rationalism about ethics and he anticipated many views and arguments that became influential as the metaethical and ethical debates evolved over the later centuries. The paper explores and assesses Price's arguments in favour of rationalism and against sentimentalism, with a view to how they bear on the modern metaethical debate.

1. INTRODUCTION

Richard Price was engaged in the debate between rationalists and sentimentalists about ethics that raged in British philosophy in the eighteenth century. Price was on the rationalist side of the debate and in this essay I shall revisit some of his chief arguments against sentimentalism and in favour of rationalism, with a view to how they bear on the modern metaethical debate.¹ Price is sometimes noted for having anticipated several arguments in metaethics and normative ethics that became highly influential as those debates evolved over the later centuries. But he is far less well-known than philosophers who defended views very similar to his in the twentieth century, such as G. E. Moore and W. D. Ross.²

Price was a clergyman with strong interests in mathematics and politics, but he was not a professional philosopher. His only contribution to moral philosophy is his *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*, which appeared in its first edition in 1757 and in a third and final edition in 1787.³ Before we consider Price's arguments we need first to get clearer about the distinction between rationalism and sentimentalism and identify the core issue in the eighteenth century debate between the two camps. These are the topics of the next section.

¹ I shall not attempt anything like a comprehensive study of Price's views and arguments. For such studies, see Åqvist 1960; Barnes 1942; Raphael 1947: Ch. 4 and 1948; and, more recently, Irwin 2008: Ch. 61.

² Neither Moore's *Principia Ethica* 1993 [1903] nor Ross's *The Right and the Good* 2002 [1930] contains references to Price's work. The commentators mentioned in n. 1 point out some of the ways in which Price anticipates Moore and Ross. See also Broad 1971, Mackie 1980, Prior 1949.

³ All references to Price are to his *Review*, edited by D. D. Raphael 1948.

2. 'A CONTROVERSY STARTED OF LATE':

RATIONALISM VS. SENTIMENTALISM

The rationalists and the sentimentalists were not in disagreement over whether there is such a thing as moral knowledge or whether there are genuine moral judgements (as opposed to judgements that ultimately concern agents' self-interests). Hume wrote in the first section of his *Second Enquiry* about 'a controversy started of late', whose core issue concerned 'the general foundation of morals; whether they be derived from reason or from sentiment; whether we attain the knowledge of them by a chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense'.⁴ Similarly, Price wrote in the first section of the *Review* that '[s]ome actions we cannot but think right, and others wrong, and of all actions we are led to form an opinion as either fit to be performed or unfit; or neither fit nor unfit to be performed; that is, indifferent. What the power within us is, which thus determines, is the question to be considered' (13). Price's straightforward answer is that it is the *understanding*, or *reason*, that enables us to distinguish between right and wrong (17). Hume allowed that reason plays an important but non-fundamental role in moral judgement, in that it informs us about the tendencies of actions and characters, but he held that it is the sentiment of *humanity* that inclines us towards actions and characters that are useful or agreeable, and that enables us to distinguish between right and wrong.

The primary disagreement between rationalists and sentimentalists thus concerned what is fundamental to the capacity of distinguishing between right and wrong, and virtue and vice. According to rationalism, what is fundamental is our ability to grasp moral truths via *a priori* reflection. We can thus say that according to rationalism, moral judgement originates in reason. According to sentimentalism, what is fundamental is our ability of having certain

⁴ Hume 1998: 73-4.

feelings, especially upon viewing matters from the perspective of an impartial spectator. We can thus say that according to sentimentalism, moral judgement originates in feeling or sentiment, rather than in reason.⁵

The question concerning what is fundamental for the capacity of distinguishing between right and wrong, and virtue and vice, is different from the psychological question concerning what kind of mental states moral judgements *are*—whether they are, e.g., beliefs, as psychological cognitivists hold, or non-cognitive states, as psychological non-cognitivists hold—and from semantic questions concerning the *meaning* of moral judgements—whether the meaning of moral judgements is the (moral) propositions they express, as semantic cognitivists hold, or whether their meaning is to express non-cognitive states, as semantic non-cognitivists hold.⁶ The term ‘sentimentalism’ is sometimes used so as to entail psychological or semantic non-cognitivism, or both. But as I use the term it entails neither.⁷

3. PRICE’S ARGUMENTATIVE STRATEGY: OUTLINE AND ASSESSMENT

3.1. *Anticipating Moore, et al., and Utilizing the Companions-in-Guilt Strategy*

Price begins by distinguishing questions concerning the nature and true account of virtue from questions concerning its subject matter (16). This is strikingly similar to the distinction Moore makes early in *Principia Ethica*, between questions concerning the meaning of ‘good’ and questions concerning what makes something good.⁸ According to Price, philosophers who found morality on such considerations as promotion of happiness—whether the agent’s own or total happiness—or divine commands, are most plausibly interpreted as offering responses

⁵ This is what Antti Kauppinen calls ‘explanatory sentimentalism’ (Kauppinen 2014: sect. 1). Rationalists can allow that some judgements that we express by using moral terms originate in sentiments or feelings rather than in *a priori* reflection, but they deny that sentiments or feelings enable us to distinguish between right and wrong, and virtue and vice. What rationalists maintain, and sentimentalists deny, is that *a priori* reflection is both necessary and sufficient for the capacity of making moral distinctions.

⁶ On the distinction between psychological and semantic non-cognitivism, see Olson 2013.

⁷ By way of analogy, it may be that having certain phenomenal experiences is fundamental to the capacity of making and grasping colour judgements. But this has no direct implications for the psychological question of what kind of state colour judgements are or for the semantic question of what their meaning or content is.

⁸ Moore 1993: Ch. 1.

to the second kind of question, concerning the subject matter of virtue. That is, as offering theories about what makes actions right or wrong. Anticipating the open question argument, Price maintains that if those theories were instead offered as responses to the first kind of question, concerning the nature and true account of virtue,

it would be palpably absurd [...] to ask, whether it is *right* to obey a command, or *wrong* to disobey it; and the propositions, *obeying a command is right*, or *producing happiness is right*, would be most trifling, as expressing no more than *obeying a command, is obeying a command*, or *producing happiness, is producing happiness* (1948: 16-17, Price's emphases; cf. 43, 106-7, 116).

Moreover, if any theory of this kind were the correct view of the nature of virtue, the dispute between rationalists and sentimentalists would be over before it even started, for it is agreed on all sides that insofar as we have knowledge about what produces happiness and what the divine commands are, it is reason that provides that kind of knowledge.

Price's main conclusions are that our ideas of right and wrong are simple ideas; that they denote what objects such as actions and characters *are* in themselves and not what people voicing the ideas of right and wrong *feel* when contemplating them; and that fundamental moral distinctions are self-evident necessary truths, and as such objects of immediate perception, or intuition (see, e.g., 41, 50, 61, 67, 85, 97-8). This package of views is highly reminiscent of the one G. E. Moore defended in the early twentieth century and it is closely connected to the kinds of non-naturalistic realism that have been revived in the recent metaethical debate. Proponents of this view typically hold that moral knowledge is accessible via *a priori* reflection, or intuition. In response to sceptics about moral knowledge, intuitionists often point to other areas, outside of morality, in which synthetic *a priori*

knowledge seems available. The point of such appeals to companions in guilt is to establish that if there is a problem with moral knowledge, it is not that moral knowledge is synthetic and *a priori*.

Price faces opposition from Hume and other empiricists who argue that reason is not a source of new ideas since all ideas ultimately derive from experience, as all simple ideas are copies of impressions.⁹ Price dismisses Hume's view as a piece of dogma, 'destitute of all proof' (42-3). But he also pursues the companions-in-guilt strategy, arguing that there are many ideas, beside those of right and wrong, that do not derive ultimately from experience but originate in our understanding. Among the examples Price mentions are solidity, substance, duration, space, infinity, and necessity and possibility (21-5). Ideas of modality are of particular relevance to his moral epistemology and his critique of sentimentalism, as we shall see presently. Like present-day intuitionists, Price's point is that if there is a problem with moral knowledge, it is not that it results from 'immediate perception[s] in the human mind' (41), for that is so with knowledge about other matters too.

Sentimentalists can respond by arguing that the non-moral ideas and knowledge to which Price appeals do after all derive ultimately from experience.¹⁰ Alternatively, they can grant that Price's appeals to companions in guilt establish that some simple ideas originate in the understanding, but resist the view that our moral ideas are among them. In order to do so, sentimentalists may insist that our moral ideas have some feature that make it more likely that they originate in our sentiments. This takes us to the perennial problem of moral motivation.

3.2. Explaining Moral Motivation

Hume famously argued that reason judges only of relations of ideas and matters of fact concerning cause and effect, and that such judgements are all motivationally inert. Moral

⁹ See, e.g., Hume 1978: 3-4.

¹⁰ Mackie 1977: 39.

judgements, by contrast, are closely linked to motivation and action. Hence, moral judgements are not conclusions of reason.¹¹ Hume concluded, as did Hutcheson before him, that moral judgements derive from sentiments.

Price criticises both his fellow rationalist John Balguy and sentimentalist Hutcheson for failing in their respective accounts of obligation and moral judgement to distinguish properly between ‘the *effect* of the obligation perceived’ and the ‘*obligation itself*’ (114, Price’s emphases).¹² In coming to hold the view that one ought morally to act in some way, one has an intellectual perception of the obligation, and the effect of such a perception is motivation to act in accordance with the obligation perceived. Thus far Price is in agreement with modern non-naturalists, who distinguish sharply between the normativity of moral judgements and their link to motivation. It is easy, then, to agree with Terry Irwin that we might expect Price to defend an externalist account of moral motivation, according to which it is possible to make a moral judgement without being motivated, since the act of intellectual perception and its effect would seem to be only contingently connected.¹³

Price’s position is not that straightforward, however. He holds that ‘virtue is naturally adapted to *please* every observing mind; and vice the contrary’ and that therefore ‘[one] cannot perceive an action to be right, without *approving* it’ (59, Price’s emphasis).¹⁴ Not only does Price reject the empiricist view that reason is not a source of new ideas, he also rejects Hume’s and Hutcheson’s view that conclusions of reason are motivationally inert. Perceptions

¹¹ Hume 1978: 457.

¹² I will take ‘perceive’ here to be a non-factive verb, but it is not entirely clear that this is how Price means it to be understood. If ‘perceive’ is in this context a factive verb, we should qualify ‘moral judgement’ as ‘true and justified moral judgement’.

¹³ Irwin 2008: 743. Irwin says that Price ‘comes close to being an externalist’ (743). Irwin then notes some complications in Price’s position and claims that ‘he does not claim that *obligation* implies our actually being moved to action’ (743, my emphasis). As we shall see in the main text, however, Price does seem to hold that there is a necessary connection between *perceiving an obligation* and being motivated to act, which seems far from an externalist view.

¹⁴ Price also claims that right actions ‘must appear *amiable*’ (59, Price’s emphasis). This claim is doubtful, as Hume’s discussion of justice shows. A just act considered on its own may be unamiable because of its pernicious consequences. Just actions and characters are useful and virtuous only insofar as they are parts of a system of just acts and characters. See, e.g., Hume 1998: 170-2.

of right and wrong, which, as we know, are immediate perceptions by reason, or intuition, ‘*excite* to action, and [are] alone a sufficient *principle* of action’ (185, Price’s emphases). As he goes on to say:

When we are conscious that an action is *fit* to be done, or that it *ought* to be done, it is not conceivable that we can remain *uninfluenced*, or want a *motive* to action. [...] An affection or inclination to rectitude cannot be separated from the view of it. The knowledge of what is right, without any approbation of it, or concern to practice it, is not conceivable or possible (1948: 186-7, Price’s emphases).

These are surprising words, coming from someone who argues in opposition to Hutcheson’s sentimentalism that it is ‘evident [...] that *right* and *pleasure*, *wrong* and *pain*, are as different as a cause and its effect’, and that to think otherwise is to fail to distinguish properly between ‘what is *understood* and what is *felt*’ (63, Price’s emphases). If what is understood and what is felt are as different as cause and effect, it is unclear why we cannot even conceive of an agent that understands a moral truth without being motivated to act accordingly.

Price’s claim that we cannot conceive of such an agent also makes him vulnerable to another form of criticism, for the strong connection he alleges between moral judgement, or moral knowledge, and motivation cries out for explanation.¹⁵ The most straightforward explanation would seem to come from a sentimentalist and psychologically non-cognitivist account, according to which moral judgements originate in sentiments and also *are* some kind of desire-like and motivationally efficacious mental state.

But Price will of course have none of that. In his view human beings are reasonable beings and all reasonable beings, in virtue of being reasonable, have *affections*, among which is the

¹⁵ The view that there is a necessary connection between moral judgement and motivation is of course importantly different from the view that there is a necessary connection between moral knowledge and motivation. For discussion, see Olson 2014: sect. 5.3.

love of truth (74). Moral distinctions, moreover, are self-evident truths, and ‘the lowest degrees of reason are sufficient to discover moral distinctions in general’ (61). Insofar as we are reasonable or minimally rational, then, we have some affection for moral truth. But how does such affection guarantee that discoveries of moral distinctions motivate us to act? Price’s somewhat evasive answer is that to understand moral truths is to understand what is to be done and what is not to be done, and questions as to why reasonable beings are motivated to do what they know or judge is to be done and to refrain from doing what they know or judge is not to be done, ‘need not, and [...] deserve not to be answered’ (187). Insofar as we are rational, we have affections that motivate us to act as reason or intuition tells us we ought to act: ‘Reason is [...] the *natural* and *authoritative* guide of a rational being’ (109, Price’s emphases). No further explanation is called for concerning moral motivation in reasonable beings. While this may be unsatisfactory as far as explanation goes, it is worth noting that Price is not committed to the view that moral truths have a queer feature of ‘to-be-pursuedness’ that exercises a motivational pull on the human psyche.¹⁶ Moral truths motivate only insofar as they are perceived by rational agents who have rational affections, such as the love of truth, including moral truth.

However, Price notes that human beings are far from perfectly reasonable. The motivational influence of affections ‘must [...] be in proportion to the strength [...] of the rational faculties of beings and their acquaintance with truth and the nature of things’ (61). But since ‘our intellectual faculties are in their infancy’ reason alone often loses out in the battle against irrational passions and weakness of will (61-2). For this reason, God has remedied the motivational imperfections of human reason by ‘annexing to our intellectual perceptions sensations and instincts, which give them greater weight and force’ (62). In other words, realising the limitations of human reason and will power, God has seen to it that we

¹⁶ Mackie 1977: 40. However, Price holds, as do many present-day non-naturalists, that moral truths have ‘a real obligatory power antecedent to all positive laws, and independently of all will’ (105). Mackie and other moral sceptics may well be right that this feature of moral facts is queer. For discussion, see Olson 2014: Chs. 5 and 6.

want to act morally, so that ‘in contemplating the actions of moral agents, we have both a *perception of the understanding* and a *feeling of the heart*’ (62, Price’s emphasis).¹⁷

To modern readers, Price’s explanation of moral motivation is likely to seem unpersuasive. But it is worth noting that his invocation of God’s remedy for the limitations of human reason is structurally similar to so-called ‘third factor’ accounts that some present-day non-naturalists appeal to in order to explain the correlation between our moral beliefs and necessary moral truths that do not causally influence our beliefs. The third factor is typically identified as natural selection and the idea is that some moral beliefs that coincide with necessary moral truths are advantageous from an evolutionary perspective. A corresponding view about moral motivation would be that natural selection has favoured motivational patterns that correlate with moral truths. In some modern versions of non-naturalism, then, natural selection plays a role that overlaps partly with the role of God in Price’s theory. Needless to say, few modern metaethicists will want to rest their theories on the supposition that God exists. But the conclusion to draw might be that the structure of Price’s explanation of moral motivation is more persuasive than its substance.

However that may be, it is clear that Price posits a remarkably strong connection between moral judgement, or knowledge, and motivation to act. It is far from clear that his sentimentalist opponents posited anything as strong. Would Price have been wiser to take the line of most present-day non-naturalists, and avoid commitment to any form of internalism? Probably, but his sentimentalist opponents would still seem to have the upper hand in the dialectic. For even if internalism is false, the connection between moral judgement and motivation seems intimate, and this calls for explanation. Sentimentalists like Hutcheson and Hume have a ready explanation in that they take moral judgements to originate in sentiments,

¹⁷ Hutcheson made a similar point: ‘Notwithstanding the mighty *reason* we boast of above other animals, its processes are too slow, too full of doubt and hesitation, to serve us in every exigency, either for our own preservation, without the *external senses*, or to influence our actions for the good of the whole, without [the] *moral sense*’ (2008: 180, Hutcheson’s emphases).

which are motivationally efficacious attitudes. Sometimes, however, moral judgements or ideas are not lively enough to result in passions that motivate action. This provides a plausible and straightforward explanation of why the connection between moral judgement and motivation is strong but contingent.¹⁸

In this subsection we have considered Price's defensive strategy in responding to the sentimentalist argument from moral motivation. In the following two subsections we shall consider two of his arguments against sentimentalism.¹⁹

3.3. Appealing to Introspection

To determine whether moral judgements are based on conclusions of reason or (non-rational) sentiments, Price advises us to reflect on our sense perception and intellectual faculties. When I reflect on my perceptions of the coffee mug on my desk, I seem to have no trouble determining which perceptions are due to, say, sight, and which are due to touch. Similarly, when I reflect on my convictions that $2+2=4$ and that 4 is greater than 2 I am inclined to believe that these convictions are based on, or at least supported by, conclusions of reason. According to Price, introspection tells us that moral judgements, e.g., the judgement that it is unfit or wrong that the innocent suffer, have just as great 'pretence to be denominated perceptions of the understanding' as do mathematical judgements (44, 128-9).

Price's point about appeal to introspection is suggestive. Reflecting on our moral judgements, we may note that they have some features characteristic of ordinary beliefs. For example, moral judgements can appear in embedded contexts, and we can be more or less confident or certain that, e.g., it is wrong that the innocent suffer. These points are familiar from modern metaethics and they are often taken to support cognitivism about the psychology and semantics of moral judgement. But remember that sentimentalism is not in conflict with

¹⁸ For further discussion of this point, see Olson 2014: 38.

¹⁹ For a nice discussion of Price's 'defensive' and 'offensive' arguments, see Broad 1971: 208-22.

cognitivism. The question whether moral judgements are based on conclusions of reason is not the same as the question whether moral judgements are beliefs, or whether they express beliefs.

Suppose, though, that we grant Price's point that introspection tells us that moral judgements, or at least some of them, perhaps the ones we endorse with great confidence, are based on reason rather than feelings. Can we trust introspection in this case? Hume thinks we cannot. According to Hume, we tend to think of passions as violent emotions that make us victims of immediate temptations. However, reasonable and strong-willed people who do not give in to temptations are those that are governed by *calm* passions. Since calm passions 'cause no disorder in the temper', we tend to mistake them for conclusions of reason, and that is why we believe mistakenly that reasonable and strong-willed people are those whose behaviour is governed by conclusions of reason.²⁰

Price responds that it is sentimentalists like Hume that are guilty of conflation. Price speculates that some emotion may accompany all our judgements and perceptions, but in particular moral ones. For example, the thought or judgement that the innocent suffer may be accompanied with some degree of dissatisfaction and displeasure, and correlatively the thought that the vicious suffer may be accompanied with some degree of satisfaction or pleasure. The phenomenon of perceptions accompanied by emotions has in some cases led sentimentalist philosophers to mistake the former for the latter. This mistake might be especially prone to occur in cases of intellectual perceptions accompanied by emotions, and this explains why sentimentalists mistakenly take moral judgements to be based on emotions that merely accompany moral perceptions.

Once again, however, Price makes himself vulnerable to criticism. For he holds that while introspection tells us that judgements about right and wrong are based on reason, that is not so

²⁰ Hume 1978: 437.

with respect to judgements about beauty and deformity. Terms like ‘beautiful’ and ‘odious’ ‘signify not any real qualities or characters of actions, but the *effects in us*, or the particular pleasure and pain, attending the consideration of them’ (57, Price’s emphasis). Price talks about the beauty and deformity of *actions*, but we can take his view to extend to aesthetic judgements more generally. Sentimentalists may object that Price is committed to an implausible discrepancy between judgements about right and wrong and judgements about beauty and deformity. The former seem to have no more claim than the latter to being based on conclusions of reason rather than on feelings. Hume took moral and aesthetic judgements to be closely related and argued that just as we have no impressions of beauty and deformity as mind-independent properties, we have no impressions of rightness and wrongness as mind-independent properties. He concluded that both kinds of judgement are based on feelings.²¹

3.4. *Morality Necessary and Immutable*

Throughout the *Review*, Price insists that morality is necessary and immutable. He lists six ‘branches of virtue’ concerning our duties to God and to ourselves, and duties of beneficence, gratitude, veracity, and justice (136-64). Each branch contains propositions about considerations that tend to make actions right or wrong. These propositions are fundamental moral truths, and they are necessary and self-evident.²² An example of such a proposition might be that an action’s property of being the breaking of a promise tends to make it wrong; it is necessary and self-evident that the property of being the breaking of a promise is wrong-making. Contingent moral truths about the right course of action in specific situations follow from fundamental moral truths in conjunction with non-moral truths about the situations at

²¹ See, e.g., Hume 1998: 161-2.

²² Notably, Price lists six branches of virtue and Ross lists the same number of *prima facie* duties (Ross 2002: 21). There is also substantial overlap in content: duties of beneficence, gratitude, justice, and duties to ourselves appear on both lists. Price and Ross also agree that it is difficult and perhaps impossible for us human beings to know our duty in all things considered in a certain situation, since such knowledge requires knowing a great deal about the facts of the situation and about how to balance the relevant branches of virtue or *prima facie* duties (Price 1948: 170; Ross 2002: 30-31; cf. Moore 1993: 199).

hand. Given that the fundamental moral truths and the non-moral truths are specific enough to entail contingent and particular moral truths, Price's view implies that the much-discussed problem for non-naturalists to explain the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral reduces to the problem of explaining how there can be fundamental and necessary moral truths.²³

If moral judgements are based on feelings it is not easy to see how they could be about necessary and immutable truths. There is thus a challenge here for sentimentalism. Could sentimentalists meet it by denying that there are necessary and immutable moral truths? Perhaps, but it seems plausible that *if* there are moral truths, some of them are fundamental; and it also seems plausible that they are not coincidental and that there is nothing we could do to change them, so the fundamental moral truths would indeed seem to be necessary and immutable. How could we come to know about such truths, other than by synthetic *a priori* reflection?

We sometimes make judgements about fundamental moral truths, and if Price is right that we take these truths to be necessary and immutable, it is not easy to see how judgements about them could be about feelings. Sentimentalists could accept these points, but maintain either that although fundamental moral truths *seem* necessary and immutable, our belief that they are is mistaken, or alternatively that our belief that there are moral truths is mistaken. If so, sentimentalists would be committed to attributing some kind of error to ordinary moral thought and discourse.²⁴

Price anticipates the response that we are systematically mistaken about moral properties, just as we are systematically mistaken about sensible qualities, like heat, cold, sound, and colour (46). The latter we typically take to be mind-independent properties of objects, when in

²³ For an interesting discussion about moral supervenience that utilizes some of Price's insights, see Schroeder 2014. For a discussion of the challenge for non-naturalists to explain supervenience, see Olson 2014: 88-100.

²⁴ See Mackie 1980 and Olson 2014. Irwin says of Price's objection that it 'forces sentimentalists to present their theory of moral judgements and moral properties as an "error theory"' (2008: 739).

fact they are nothing but perceptions in the minds of perceivers.²⁵ Price responds that we can realize *a priori* that sensible qualities are not mind-independent properties of objects, for ‘the ideas of matter and of these qualities, are incompatible’ (46). To say of a body that it is coloured is therefore strictly speaking as absurd as to say of a sound that it is square (46). In contrast, the ideas of rightness (wrongness) and of action are not incompatible, and it is not strictly speaking absurd to say of an action that it is right or wrong (47).

Price’s claim that talk of coloured bodies is strictly speaking absurd is peculiar. What he has in mind is probably that, given the correct account of sensible qualities, namely that they are nothing but perceptions in the minds of perceivers, it is obvious that such qualities are not mind-independent properties of objects. But this cuts no ice against error theoretic versions of sentimentalism. For they can simply deny that there is a contrast between sensible qualities and moral properties in this respect. That is, given the correct account of moral properties, namely that they are nothing but perceptions in the minds of perceivers, or alternatively that there are no moral properties, it is obvious that no action has mind-independent moral properties.

In the end, Price appeals to common sense and claims that what he takes to be an implication of the sentimentalist view, namely that ‘there [is] nothing intrinsically proper or improper, just or unjust [and] nothing *obligatory* [i.e., nothing in itself right or wrong]’ suffices to refute it (49). Sentimentalists may respond that it is far more likely that we are mistaken about moral properties than that there are properties so queer as to have ‘a real obligatory power antecedently to all positive laws, and independently of all will’ (105). That seems to leave Price and his sentimentalist opponents in a standoff. And perhaps regrettably, that seems also to be the position that debates between present-day moral realists and anti-realists tend to end up in.

²⁵ Hume 1978: 469.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This re-reading of Price's *Review* has focused on metaethics. I have only hinted at Price's normative theory, which anticipates Ross's theory of prima facie duties as well as the Kantian notions of duty for duty's sake (184) and perfect and imperfect duties (119-20), the Sidgwickian notions of objective and subjective obligation, which Price calls 'abstract' and 'practical' virtue (116-17n; 177-81), and blameless wrongdoing (184), and also H. A. Prichard's treatment of the notorious why-be-moral question (110-11). My discussion has been fairly critical, but I mean this as praise. Price's philosophy is remarkably modern and his metaethical theory runs into many of the difficulties that present-day versions of non-naturalistic realism face. Price sees many of these difficulties clearly and although his responses are to my mind not ultimately convincing, they are rewarding to think about.²⁶

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