

Mill and Williams: From Sentimentalism to Skepticism?

If morality is (in some sense) a product of human sentiment, does it follow that morality is therefore less important than it is typically and traditionally taken to be? John Stuart Mill argued powerfully against any suggestion that a conception of morality as grounded in human sentiment undermined morality's authority. In this paper I explain the basis of Mill's argument and compare it with Bernard Williams' far more skeptical assessment of (in Williams' words) "what needs to be, and what can be, restructured in the light of a reflective and nonmythical understanding of our ethical practices." Mill responds with relative ease to worries about accounts of morality which conceive of value as rooted in human sentiment. I explain how Mill's strong conception of human nature plays an indispensable role in this regard. Williams does not wish to draw on a strong account of human nature and this gives his projective conception of ethical value a far more problematic character. To put the problem in a nutshell: if we do not have a universal human nature, then how can we have a universally projected morality? Williams (as have many others) has given up on both human nature and the other obvious candidates (God, reason) upon which to found a universal morality. What prospect is there for a secular ethics with a post-Darwinian, ethically insubstantial conception of human nature and an instrumentalist conception of rationality?

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