

Ralph Cudworth

A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality, With A Treatise of Freewill.

Ed. Sarah Hutton.

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Ralph Cudworth's *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* has been rescued from obscurity once again, this time by the new Cambridge series of texts in the history of philosophy. Written in the early 1660s, this work lay unpublished for seventy years; it was first brought to the press by the Bishop of Durham in 1731, who found in it 'a proper Antidote to the poison in some of Mr. Hobbes's and other's writings' and expressed hope that it would help to resolve the 'new controversies' concerning freewill and necessity. In 1845 it resurfaced in John Harrison's three-volume edition of Cudworth; Harrison also respected Cudworth as 'the powerful opponent of Hobbes, and the worst forms of philosophical infidelity'. While several facsimiles of these editions have been published over the years, and excerpts from the *Treatise* have appeared in a number of compilations, Sarah Hutton's Cambridge volume is the first new edition of the work in a century and a half. In Hutton's estimation, Cudworth must be appreciated not only as an anti-Hobbiist, but also as an active figure in the rapidly changing intellectual climate of the early Enlightenment, a scholar who read Bacon, Galileo, Descartes and Spinoza, alongside the ancients, and whose historical influence reached Locke, Shaftesbury, Price, Reid, and possibly Kant.

Reading the *Treatise* will not yield any immediate answers to questions of Cudworth's influence on his near contemporaries: while Hutton alludes to 'the possibility of manuscript circulation' (xxviii) most would have known Cudworth through the one work he did publish in his lifetime, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, which was published in 1678, and which contains revised versions of many of the arguments of the *Treatise*. Locke, in particular, seems to have studied the *System* closely, especially in composing his arguments against innatism. But, despite the *System's* greater influence in its day, there are reasons why we have now the *Treatise* before us instead: it presents a clearer and more succinct statement of Cudworth's views on epistemology and the foundations of ethics, trimmed of his long disquisitions on atheism through the ages, and with fewer lengthy quotations from antiquity. The *Treatise* for this reason provides the modern reader with an excellent introduction to Cudworth's thought; furthermore, for those who become inspired to look more deeply into Cudworth or his impact on his contemporaries, footnotes in this new edition of the *Treatise* identify corresponding sections of the *System*.

The *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* is (somewhat surprisingly, given the title) mainly concerned with epistemology. Cud-

worth's declared intention in the work is to refute the view that moral good and evil are produced by convention or institution, whether human or divine. In the first and shortest of the four books that compose the *Treatise*, Cudworth argues that morality cannot first arise from positive commands, because they presuppose a prior moral order for their legitimacy. He then argues that we cannot see God as creating a moral order through an arbitrary act of will; rather, if God is to be credited with benevolence, God's will must be guided by his recognition of the eternal essences of good and evil. The second book offers a general defense of eternal essences; in particular, Cudworth is keen to establish the compatibility of his doctrine with the 'atomical, corpuscular or mechanical philosophy, that solves all the phenomena of the corporeal world by those intelligible principles of magnitude, figure, site, and motion' (34). Sympathetic to this 'atomical' philosophy, which he takes to have originated even before Democritus and Epicurus, and to be only 'lately restored by Cartesius and Gassendus' (38), Cudworth directs his arguments against Protagoras, whom Hutton calls 'a kind of stalking horse for Thomas Hobbes' (xviii). Against the Protagorean claim that the atomical philosophy implies that all truth is merely relative and all opinions the products of sense impressions, Cudworth contends that the atomical philosophy in fact presupposes that we possess a rational faculty capable of grasping the difference between what is real and what is only apparent. If we were merely passive recipients of sense impressions, Cudworth argues, we would be unable to grasp that secondary qualities are not absolutely in the objects we perceive, and unable to grasp the abstract geometrical and mechanical principles by which the atomical philosophy makes matter intelligible. In fact, Cudworth claims that the atomical philosophy serves as 'the most impregnable bulwark' against atheism and immorality, insofar as it implies that the mind is not simply passive but is able to judge what is true, on the basis of rational principles (48). The third book presents the distinction between sensation and knowledge in more detail, with particular emphasis on the claim that sensation on its own fails to distinguish between the real and the fantastical. In the last book, Cudworth argues that the knowing mind is not passive, that even knowledge of corporeal nature requires the active participation of the intellect, and that the 'intelligible notions of things' are eternal and immutable.

The Cambridge edition also includes Cudworth's *Treatise of Freewill*, first published in 1838. Starting from the observation that we seem to presuppose human freedom in holding others morally responsible for their acts, Cudworth is concerned to explain how freedom is possible in a world that might seem to operate by purely mechanical principles, and under the watch of an omniscient God. Again, his approach is epistemological: he argues that our thought is not simply the product of corporeal impacts, and from this he deduces the presence of an active power of conscience in the soul. From the fact of self-consciousness, he argues to possibility of the soul's acting upon itself. Our self-governance is such that 'we are not merely passive to our own practical judgements and to the appearances of good, but contribute some-

thing of our own to them' (179). Anyone intrigued by Stephen Darwall's recent study of the similarities between Cudworth and Kant will find much of interest in this short essay.

Hutton's clear and well-researched introduction to the volume provides a useful historical background for the work, and a summary of Cudworth's arguments. The summary is not entirely on the mark; for example, while she praises Cudworth as 'a thoroughly self-consistent thinker' (xxviii), she ascribes to him the view that 'the senses do not perceive external objects as they are' (xxi-xxii) but claims that Cudworth is 'not anti-empiricist ... he specifically acknowledges the adequacy of the senses for providing knowledge of the external world and of the body' (xxii). For this latter point she cites p.57, where Cudworth grants that the senses are adequate to warn us of external things in a way that may be useful as far as the body is concerned, but insists that sensation is *not* knowledge; sensation can at best 'give the understanding sufficient hints' that the understanding may 'by its own sagacity' attain knowledge of external objects (57).

The text itself is presented with an excellent index and good footnotes, in which Cudworth's classical sources are presented clearly and his inaccuracies noted; there are some particularly useful references to relevant passages in Descartes, Hobbes, and Cudworth's own *True Intellectual System*. The volume contains a glossary, indispensable for an author whose diction is as inventive as that of Cudworth, whose antiquarian style results in what he might term some rather operose ambages of discourse. Notwithstanding Cudworth's occasional bouts of rhetorical excess, the text is in fact quite readable; Hutton has modernized the spelling and punctuation, and also broken up some of his lengthy sentences. The results of this last innovation are sometimes awkward: after a sentence describing Epicurus's allegiance to the atomical philosophy, and to the claim that the human soul is merely a corporeal phenomenon, Hutton presents, as a separate sentence, the fragment 'Than which two assertions nothing can be more contradictory' (152); this ungrammatical division does more to unsettle the modern reader than Cudworth's original longwindedness. But on the whole there is much to be admired in Hutton's scholarly presentation of this rich and provocative text.

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