

Francis Hutcheson and John Clarke: Self-Interest, Desire, and Divine Impassibility

JOHN J. TILLEY
INDIANA UNIVERSITY–PURDUE UNIVERSITY INDIANAPOLIS
jtilley@iupui.edu

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ABSTRACT: I address a puzzle about one of Francis Hutcheson's objections to psychological egoism. The puzzle concerns his premise that God receives no benefit from rewarding the virtuous. Why, in the early editions of his *Inquiry Concerning Virtue* (1725, 1726), does Hutcheson leave this premise undefended? And why, in the later editions (1729, 1738), does he continue to do so, knowing that in 1726 John Clarke of Hull had subjected the premise to plausible criticism, geared to the very audience (mainly Christian) for whom Hutcheson's objection to egoism was written? This puzzle is not negligible. Some might claim that Hutcheson ruins his objection by ignoring Clarke's criticism. To answer the puzzle we must consider not only Hutcheson's philosophy, but also some theological assumptions of Hutcheson's time.

1.

Often, we can answer a puzzle about a philosophical text only by looking beyond the text itself and even beyond the philosophical context in which it was written. We must look at the wider intellectual context of its time—for instance, at assumptions in theology.

A puzzle of this kind arises from the debate between Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) and John Clarke of Hull (1687–1734) over the relation between desire and self-interest. In particular, it arises from a passage in Hutcheson's *Inquiry Concerning Virtue*, especially if we read a related passage in Clarke's *Foundation of Morality in Theory and Practice*.¹ These works are well known to students of the British moralists; so I suspect that others besides me have considered the puzzle. However, to my knowledge no one has answered the puzzle or even discussed it in print, despite the historical and philosophical importance of Hutcheson's *Inquiry*. The puzzle merits attention for these reasons. A further reason, already indicated, is that to examine the puzzle is to highlight the importance of intellectual context to questions in the history of philosophy.

¹ The first of these two titles is short for *An Inquiry Concerning the Original of our Ideas of Virtue or Moral Good* (hereafter *Inquiry*, for short), the second of the two essays in Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry*

A full explanation of the puzzle requires background material, which I provide in section 2. But let me say here that the puzzle concerns one of Hutcheson's objections to psychological egoism. Although Hutcheson intends that objection for a Christian audience, one of its premises not only invites, but receives from John Clarke, a challenge of a Christian kind. Also, in the later editions of his *Inquiry* Hutcheson is well aware of that challenge. Why, then, does Hutcheson advance his premise without argument, not only in the early editions of his *Inquiry* but in the editions following Clarke's challenge? Why does he make no reply to the Christian challenge Clarke issues, while continuing to expect Christians to accept the argument Clarke challenges? This is the puzzle I address.

2.

In this section I provide background material; in the next section I explain the puzzle. In section 4 I address a possibly tempting, but defective, answer to the puzzle. In section 5 I give my own answer, and in section 6 I address a question my answer may raise.

In the first section of his *Inquiry* (each edition), Hutcheson argues that we have a moral sense through which we feel approval for certain deeds, namely, those that appear to spring from fundamental, benevolent desires.² By a fundamental desire I mean a desire we possess insofar as we want something for its own sake, not simply as a means to something else. By a benevolent desire I mean a desire for the happiness (good, well-being) of one or more people besides the agent, the "agent" being the person who has the desire. In Hutcheson's view, when we perceive an act to flow from a fundamental desire for the happiness of others, we automatically feel moral approval of the act, owing to our moral sense.

This view of Hutcheson's invites a question: do we really have *fundamental* benevolent desires? Do we ever want the happiness of others for its own sake, not merely as a means to something else? To answer no, and to hold further that every fundamental human desire aims only at a benefit to the agent—for instance, at the agent's own happiness or survival—is to hold the thesis of *psychological egoism*. This thesis was a major source of debate among British philosophers of the eighteenth century, with Clarke and Hutcheson among the key contributors.³ That Hutcheson would contribute to the debate is

² IBV2 117-35. See also IBV2 116, 162, 224; IBV3 110-130, 151.

³ Excerpts from many of the contributions are in D. H. Monro, ed., *A Guide to the British Moralists* (London UK: Collins, 1972). A useful discussion of the debate is Christian Maurer, "Self-Interest and Sociability" in James A. Harris, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), pp. 291-314. An excellent introduction to psychological egoism is Joshua May, "Psychological Egoism," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. James Fieser and Bradley Dowden, ISSN 2161-0002, <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/psychegeo/>>, 2011.

no surprise, for psychological egoism conflicts with his presupposition that some deeds spring from fundamental benevolent desires. Predictably, in section 2 of his *Inquiry* he advances many objections to psychological egoism.⁴

Most of Hutcheson's objections appeal to introspection or ordinary experience.⁵ One of them, however, employs theological assumptions.⁶ Hutcheson improved the objection slightly in revising his *Inquiry* for the third edition; so let me quote the objection from that edition:⁷

Had we no other *ultimate Desire* but that of *private Advantage*, we must imagine that every *rational Being* acts only for its own *Advantage*; and however we may call a *beneficent Being* a *good Being*, because it acts for our *Advantage*, yet upon *this Scheme* we should not be apt to think there is any *beneficent Being* in *Nature*, or a *Being* who acts for the *Good* of others. Particularly, If there is no *Sense* of Excellence in *publick Love*, and promoting the Happiness of others, whence should this Persuasion arise, "That the Deity will make the *Virtuous* happy?" Can we prove that it is for the *Advantage* of the Deity to do so? This I fancy will be look'd upon as very absurd, by many who yet expect Mercy and Beneficence in the Deity. And if there be such Dispositions in the Deity, where is the impossibility of some small degree of this *publick Love* in his *Creatures*? And why must

⁴ IBV2 136-61, especially 146-61; IBV3 131-64, especially 137-64.

⁵ Useful discussions of them include Henning Jensen, *Motivation and the Moral Sense in Francis Hutcheson's Ethical Theory* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1971), pp. 13-19; Robert M. Stewart, "John Clarke and Francis Hutcheson on Self-Love and Moral Motivation," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 20 (1982): 261-77; Mark Strasser, *Francis Hutcheson's Moral Theory: Its Form and Utility* (Wakefield NH: Longwood Academic, 1990), ch. 4; Thomas Mautner, "Introduction" in Thomas Mautner, ed., *Francis Hutcheson: Two Texts on Human Nature* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 1-87, at pp. 33-47; Michael B. Gill, *The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 141-50; and Terence Cuneo, "Reason and the Passions" in Harris, pp. 226-47, at pp. 227-29.

⁶ A brief account of this objection is in Cuneo, p. 229. See also John J. Tilley, "Hutcheson's Theological Objection to Egoism," *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 14 (2016): 101-123.

⁷ The main difference between the objection as it appears in the third edition and the objection as it appears in the second is that in the latter, instead of the sentence, "This I fancy will be look'd upon as very absurd, by many who yet expect Mercy and Beneficence in the Deity," we find this: "This I fancy will be look'd upon as very absurd, unless we suppose some beneficent Dispositions essential to the Deity, which determine him to consult the *publick Good* of his *Creatures*, and reward such as co-operate with his *kind Intention*" (IBV2 150). This difference is immaterial if, in the latter sentence, the word "*Advantage*" has an especially broad meaning or the word "this" refers, not to the thought that "it is for the *Advantage* of the Deity to [make the virtuous happy]," but to the slightly earlier thought that "the Deity will make the *Virtuous* happy." Otherwise a problem occurs, which is that the sentence seems to suggest that as long as the deity has some beneficent dispositions, he benefits himself—receives pleasure or happiness—by making the virtuous happy. This suggestion is unwanted because one of the points of Hutcheson's objection is that regardless of what desires the deity has, the deity does not benefit himself by making us happy (his "Interests are independent on us"). This point is crucial to Hutcheson's claim that, to explain why the deity does in fact make us happy, we must suppose that he has "some other Principle of Action ... than *Self-Love*." It is thus no surprise that Hutcheson revised the problematic sentence in the third edition of the *Inquiry*.

they be suppos'd incapable of acting but from *Self-Love*?

In short, without acknowledging some other Principle of Action in rational Agents than *Self-Love*, I see no Foundation to expect *Beneficence*, or *Rewards* from *God*, or *Man*, farther than it is the *Interest* of the *Benefactor*; and all Expectation of Benefits from a *Being* whose Interests are independent on us, must be *perfectly ridiculous*. What should engage the Deity to reward *Virtue*? (IBV3 156-57.)

If we wish to reconstruct this argument step by step, there is room for disagreement about how best to do so. However, since every viable reconstruction will include the premise I plan to discuss, allow me to be brief on this matter by saying the following. First, I take the core of the argument to be in the first paragraph—in the portion starting with “Particularly.” (The earlier portion, I believe, is introductory material that Hutcheson fleshes out in the later portion; and the two sentences following that portion, those beginning with “In short,” summarize key points of the objection.) Second, I see the argument as having two targets. One of them is psychological egoism; the other is evaluative egoism, the view that we can fundamentally value, consider good for its own sake, nothing but benefits to ourselves. Third, the following is a fair reconstruction of the part of the argument concerned with psychological egoism:⁸

Although God rewards the virtuous, God does not benefit himself by doing so. It is not “for the *Advantage* of the Deity to do so”; his “Interests are independent on us.” Thus, it is reasonable to think that God rewards the virtuous out of a fundamental desire for their happiness—that is, God makes the virtuous happy because he desires their happiness for its own sake.⁹ Furthermore, if it is reasonable to think that God has fundamental desires for the happiness of others, it is reasonable to think that we humans are capable of such desires. Therefore, it is reasonable to think that humans are capable of fundamental desires for the happiness of others, and hence that psychological egoism is false.

Let us call this argument Hutcheson’s *theological objection*—meaning his theological objection to psychological egoism. It contains much of interest; it also raises a puzzle. The puzzle concerns the following premise, which I call the no-benefit thesis, or NB:

⁸ Were I to expand the reconstruction to reflect the part of the argument concerned with evaluative egoism, I would begin the paragraph with the sentence, “If evaluative egoism is true, in which case ‘there is no *Sense* of Excellence in *publick Love* ...,’ then God rewards the virtuous only if he benefits himself by doing so.” Also, following the clause “his ‘Interests are independent on us’” I would insert the intermediate conclusion (left implicit by Hutcheson) that evaluative egoism is false.

⁹ Objection: perhaps God has a fundamental desire to do good, and rewarding the virtuous furthers that end. Although this objection may necessitate slight revisions to Hutcheson’s argument, the revised argument will be no less challenging to psychological egoism than the present one.

NB: God does not benefit himself by rewarding the virtuous.

Let us note something before going on, namely, that NB does not imply that God receives nothing, not even the fulfilment of a desire, by rewarding the virtuous. By rewarding them he fulfils his desire to do. However, to fulfil a desire is merely to bring about the state of affairs the desire has as its object, whatever that may be. This is not necessarily to receive a benefit in any ordinary sense, such as pleasure or happiness. (Often, the fulfilment of a desire brings pleasure, but it does not do so necessarily.) The point of NB is that God receives no benefit of that kind by rewarding the virtuous.

Although NB may spawn no puzzle on a first reading, it does so when we read John Clarke's replies to Hutcheson's case against egoism. Although those replies aim explicitly at the second edition of Hutcheson's *Inquiry*, Hutcheson's theological objection in that edition is basically the same as the version I quoted. It thus relies on NB, Clarke's reply to which is of interest for this paper.

Before I present that reply, let me say a few words about Clarke and his relation to Hutcheson. Clarke was a classical scholar, educational reformer, and, for many years, master of the Hull grammar school. He was also a moral theorist who, in his *Foundation*, attacked the moral sentimentalism of Hutcheson and the moral rationalism of Samuel Clarke (1675–1729).¹⁰ Along the way he developed his own moral theory, which tries to harmonize theological voluntarism, ethical egoism, and the view that morality concerns the general good.¹¹ Details of this theory need not concern us, except to say that among Clarke's premises was the view that humans can fundamentally desire nothing but their own pleasure (to include the absence of pain).¹² This view is a brand of psychological egoism; hence, not surprisingly, Hutcheson's objections to psychological egoism receive criticism in Clarke's *Foundation*.¹³

Hutcheson was well aware of Clarke's criticisms. In fact, in his *Essay on the Passions* (1728) and in the third edition of his *Inquiry* (1729) he wrote the parts on psychological egoism with Clarke's *Foundation* keenly in mind.¹⁴ Consider this remark from Hutcheson's *Essay* (p. xii):

¹⁰ Clarke's *Foundation* divides into two parts. Pages 3 through 40 criticize Samuel Clarke's moral theory; pages 41 through 112 criticize Hutcheson's.

¹¹ Clarke, pp. 8-25, 31-32, 35-38, 39-40, 49, 64, 69-70, 105-106. Theological voluntarism asserts, roughly, that an act is morally right if and only if it comports with God's will. Ethical egoism asserts, roughly, that an act is morally right if and only if it best serves the interests of the agent.

¹² Clarke, pp. 25-27, 53-57, 63-64.

¹³ Clarke, pp. 78-97, 101-104.

¹⁴ The first of the titles mentioned here is short for *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions* (hereafter *Essay*, for short), the first of the two essays in Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections. With Illustrations On the Moral Sense* (London UK: J. Darby and T. Browne, 1728). For valuable material on how Clarke's *Foundation* influenced Hutcheson's *Essay* and the third edition of Hutcheson's *Inquiry*, see Luigi Turco, "Sympathy and Moral Sense: 1725–1740," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 7 (1999): 79-101, at 82-89.

The principal Objections offer'd by Mr. *Clarke* of *Hull*, against the second Section of the second *Treatise* [i.e., against section 2 of Hutcheson's *Inquiry*], occur'd to the Author [Hutcheson] in Conversation, and had appriz'd him of the necessity of a farther illustration of *disinterested Affections*, in answer to his [Clarke's] Scheme of deducing them from *Self-Love*, which seem'd more ingenious than any which the Author of the *Inquiry* ever yet saw in print.

In light of this passage and of the facts I have described, there can be little doubt that Hutcheson was well acquainted with each of Clarke's replies to Hutcheson's case against egoism. Notably, those replies include the following challenge to NB:

I see no Reason or Foundation for the Expectation of Beneficence or Rewards from God, if he do not Delight, or take a Pleasure in doing Good. Without this Supposition, I understand not for my part, in what Sense he could be called a good Being. The Scripture, it's certain, represents him, and in very strong Terms, as a Being that delights in Mercy and Loving-Kindness; and why we should not understand those and the like Expressions literally, I know not. ... No Body doubts, I suppose, but he is a very happy Being; and why may not one part of his Happiness be thought to consist in a Delight to do Good? I hardly believe, our Author will be able to shew any absurd Consequence to follow from such a Supposition. (Clarke, pp. 90-91.)

In Hutcheson's partial summary of his theological objection (the passage starting with "In short"), he had said that because God's "Interests are independent on us," we have no reason to expect rewards from God unless God acts from principles other than self-love. Clarke is here replying that on the contrary, we have no reason to expect rewards from God unless God receives pleasure from doing good, in which case (we are to infer) self-love is the likely motive from which God rewards us. Clarke further claims that God receives pleasure from doing good. In claiming this, Clarke is rejecting NB, the premise that God does not benefit himself by rewarding the virtuous.

Clarke sees two reasons for rejecting NB. First, since God is good, he surely delights in doing good deeds. These include rewarding the virtuous. Second, many biblical passages clash with NB. Many of them imply that God receives pleasure from doing good to people. Although Clarke quotes no scriptural passages, many could serve his purpose. Consider Jeremiah 32:41 (RSV): "I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul."

3.

I now can explain the puzzle about NB. To start, let me say that Clarke's challenge to NB is not only plausible but arresting. Hutcheson no doubt intends his theological objection for educated religious believers of his place and time, the vast majority of whom are Christians. But imagine a Christian reading Clarke's

challenge to NB, having earlier accepted Hutcheson's theological objection. Would this reader not pause and seriously rethink whether NB stands up? Also, in anticipation of such readers, would Hutcheson not want to address Clarke's challenge, especially given a convenient opportunity to do so? He had such an opportunity when he revised his *Inquiry* for the third edition. Yet despite the respect for Clarke implicit in that edition, neither in that work nor in any other did Hutcheson address Clarke's challenge to NB.¹⁵ This is curious as it stands, and even more so given that Hutcheson did not remove his theological objection from the third (or fourth) edition of the *Inquiry*. The objection appears there as I quoted it; yet with nothing added to thwart Clarke's challenge.

We thus have a puzzle, which we can express with precision as follows:

Since Hutcheson intends his theological objection for a primarily Christian audience, why does he advance NB without argument, not just in the early editions of his *Inquiry* but also in the editions following the appearance of Clarke's *Foundation*? Why does he do so, that is, given that NB not only invites, but receives at Clarke's hands, a challenge of a Christian kind—namely, that NB clashes with Christian scripture and with the tenet that God is good?

This puzzle is not negligible. Some might contend that by ignoring Clarke's challenge to NB, Hutcheson deprives his theological objection of sufficient force to persuade his audience.

A plausible answer to the puzzle is available, though it is not to be found in Hutcheson's *Inquiry*. More generally, it is not to be found in his strictly philosophical tenets. We must consider his theological tenets and, especially, the theological assumptions of his place and time.

4.

Before I answer the puzzle let me discuss a possibly tempting, but defective, answer. It says that in the third edition of the *Inquiry*, not only does Hutcheson retain his theological objection and make no comeback to Clarke's reply, he also does the same with most of his non-theological objections to egoism. In other words, for nearly all of them to which Clarke had explicitly or implicitly replied, Hutcheson retains them and makes no direct response to Clarke. In general, Hutcheson's method for handling Clarke's replies is not to discard his early objections to egoism, but simply to add new ones that sidestep the replies.¹⁶ So it is really no puzzle—or no *special* puzzle—that Hutcheson

¹⁵ Regarding the implicit respect for Clarke: The third edition of the *Inquiry* contains many revisions in response to Clarke's critique of the second edition. See Turco, pp. 87-89.

¹⁶ For instance, consider the objections to egoism in the following pages of IBV2: 146-47 ("Do we only love the *Beneficent* Now this is plainly impossible"); 147 ("Or can any one say which is indeed pretty common"); 153 ("If our sole Intention as fear of Danger, overballances it"); 155-56 ("An honest

retains his theological objection and leaves Clarke's challenge to it unanswered. This action is part of a general procedure; it is not confined to just one objection.

In responding to this answer I must speak just as generally and as abstractly as the answer itself. Space requires this, given the variety of Hutcheson's objections and Clarke's replies.

Consider the following theses:

1. Our affectionate feelings for others (for instance, for those who have been generous to us) arise from our belief that by having those feelings we can benefit ourselves.
2. Our desire to make others happy arises from our belief that by having that desire we can benefit ourselves.
3. Our desire to make others happy arises from our belief that by having that desire, or that by achieving its object, we can receive money, favors, material goods and the like.
4. Our desire to make others happy arises from our belief that by achieving the object of that desire—that is, by making others happy—we can somehow benefit ourselves. For one thing, we can receive the pleasure that humans naturally and directly derive from seeing others happy.

These theses are distinct. Arguably, however, Hutcheson did not see the distinctions clearly in the early editions of his *Inquiry*. He later did so partly because, in general, Clarke's comments on Hutcheson's non-theological objections to egoism reduce to this point: Although those objections may refute one or more of the first three theses, they do not touch thesis 4, which represents psychological egoism (or the egoist's account of benevolence) much better than do the other three.¹⁷ In the third edition of the *Inquiry* Hutcheson tries to overcome this point, though generally not by discarding or significantly revising his early non-theological objections to egoism. Rather, he supplements

Farmer will tell you *this Love* then must be *disinterested*"); and 158-59 ("And that this is so in fact and we should *delight* in their Happiness"). These objections reappear in IBV3 154-55, 155, 146, 159-60, 161-63. Hutcheson then supplements them with new objections that circumvent Clarke's earlier replies. See IBV3 145-47.

¹⁷ For example, to the objection in IBV2 146-47 ("Do we only love the *Beneficent* ..."), Clarke makes three replies. They appear in Clarke, pp. 78-80, 82-84, 87-88. (The third also appears in Clarke, pp. 81-82.) The first reply essentially argues that Hutcheson's objection runs afoul of the distinction between thesis 1 and the remaining three theses. The second and third replies, together, essentially contend that Hutcheson's objection overlooks the distinction between theses 2 and 3 on the one hand, and thesis 4 on the other. Collectively, the three replies purport to show that even if Hutcheson's objection refutes theses 1, 2, and 3, it leaves 4 unscathed.

them with new objections that target thesis 4.¹⁸ Those new objections identify various desires for the happiness of others—for instance, for our family’s happiness after our death—which, Hutcheson believes, thesis 4 cannot plausibly explain. To explain them, he thinks, we must postulate fundamental, benevolent desires. This is the same style of argument we find in his early non-theological objections, only now it aims clearly at thesis 4.

Given these facts, it is no surprise that in the third edition of his *Inquiry*, Hutcheson retains many of his early non-theological objections to egoism and makes no direct response to Clarke’s replies. Charitably interpreted, Hutcheson does this on the grounds—undisputed by Clarke—that those non-theological objections refute one or more of the first three theses, which some egoists may hold. In fact, Hutcheson clearly takes theses 3 and 4 to reflect the only promising “ways in which some may deduce *Benevolence* from *Self-Love*,” and apparently sees 3 as vulnerable to many of his early non-theological objections.¹⁹

However, the grounds just mentioned have no relevance to Hutcheson’s theological objection. They fail to explain why he retains that objection and makes no comeback to Clarke’s reply. This is because Hutcheson’s theological objection does not address any of the above four theses. (At least, it does not do so except remotely, by challenging psychological egoism.) Nor does Clarke’s reply to it claim that it leaves thesis 4 untouched. The issue in this case is not what best explains a human desire or feeling—that is, whether the desire or feeling arises according to one of the four theses listed above, or instead springs from fundamental benevolence. Rather, the issue is simply whether NB, the premise that God does not benefit himself by rewarding the virtuous, is true. So even after we read Hutcheson’s new objections to psychological egoism—or more generally, read his revisions and additions in the third edition of his *Inquiry*—we are left with our earlier question: Why does Hutcheson advance NB without argument, and continue to do so even after Clarke’s challenge to it. As yet we have no answer to this question. I provide one in the next section.

5.

Let me first say that my answer is somewhat speculative. Seldom can we be certain of an author’s unstated aims and assumptions. Even so, my answer is plausible. It has five parts:

First, Hutcheson reasonably assumes, and takes his readers to assume, that to say that God does not benefit himself by rewarding the virtuous (that it is not “for the *Advantage* of the Deity to do so”) is to say that God does not increase

¹⁸ IBV3 145-47. Thesis 4 is what Hutcheson means by Clarke’s “Scheme of deducing them [disinterested affections] from *Self-Love*,” which to Hutcheson is “more ingenious” than any other extant scheme of that kind. See, in section 2, the block quotation from Hutcheson’s *Essay*.

¹⁹ See IBV3 137-44, 154-55, 155, 146, 161-63. (The quoted phrase is on page 137.)

his happiness (pleasure, well-being) by rewarding them. Hutcheson also reasonably assumes that although the word “increase” does not appear in Clarke’s challenge to NB, Clarke’s main point—or what readers would naturally see as that point—is that God’s happiness increases as a result of making the virtuous happy. For Clarke maintains that we should take “literally” the scriptural passages which say that God delights, takes pleasure, in doing good. Just as important, Clarke does this in opposition to Hutcheson’s view that God reaps no advantage from rewarding the virtuous, that God’s “Interests are independent on us.” From what Clarke says, and from its context, a natural reading of his point is that God’s happiness can increase. It can do so through an increase in the happiness of virtuous people.

Second, Hutcheson thinks that owing to God’s attributes, God cannot increase his happiness through an increase in the happiness of virtuous people. Hutcheson believes that God’s simplicity, immutability, and perfection rule out changes in God’s emotions. Consider this passage from Hutcheson’s *Synopsis of Metaphysics*:

The virtues or perfections of God are *infinite* ... and ... he is endowed with every true and pure perfection. ... God is a *simple* nature without parts The perfections of God are not therefore adventitious but are all necessarily connected with the divine nature from the beginning. He is therefore *immutable* There are no violent emotions in God, analogous to human passions Although God is held to delight in external events, especially in the best and happiest state of the world, the divine happiness is not therefore made uncertain, precarious, or dependent on external things, since all external things and their entire condition depend upon his most powerful *self*. ... There seems to be nothing that the most blessed God could seek as a result of self-love that would increase his happiness. ... All intentions for his own actions seem to emanate rather from his unwavering benevolence and his natural and unchangeable will to share his felicity with others.²⁰

Note the sentence, “There seems to be nothing that the most blessed God could seek as a result of self-love that would increase his happiness.” This, in essence, is a generalized version of NB, assuming the equivalence between benefitting oneself and increasing one’s happiness. And although the sentence does not begin with “therefore,” it receives support from what precedes it. For what precedes it, among other things, is the view that God’s emotional life differs entirely from ours. First, God has no violent emotions, nothing akin to human passions. Second, although God is “held to” delight in external events, his perfect delight or pleasure does not *depend* on such events. It is not affected by, does not rise or fall with, such things as an increase in our happiness. Third,

²⁰ Francis Hutcheson, *Synopsis of Metaphysics* (1742), in Francis Hutcheson, *Logic, Metaphysics, and the Natural Sociability of Mankind*, ed. James Moore and Michael Silverthorne, trans. Michael Silverthorne (Indianapolis IN: Liberty Fund, 2006), pp. 57-187, at pp. 164, 165, 173. In his introduction to this work (p. xxiii), James Moore says that “it seems most probable that Hutcheson composed [it] in the 1720s.”

God is immutable in his perfections, including, presumably, his perfect happiness.

In short, the nature and quality of God's emotional life, and hence God's happiness, is unchanging and unaffected by things external to him. Indeed, being immutable, it is unaffected even by things internal to him or done by him.

This thesis is not original with Hutcheson. It is the age-old doctrine of *divine impassibility*.²¹ This brings me to the third part of my answer, namely, that this doctrine was orthodox among Christians of Hutcheson's time. Indeed, it was orthodox until a little over a century ago, when various theologians began a debate over it that continues today.²² As Thomas Weinandy observes, "from the dawn of the Patristic period [until 'toward the end of the nineteenth century'] Christian theology has held as axiomatic that God is impassible—that is, He does not undergo emotional changes of state, and so cannot suffer."²³

Other scholars agree. Paul Helm, for instance, observes that "the classic Christian tradition, as well as that of the Reformation, including Calvin, and that of the Westminster Confession, affirms God's impassibility."²⁴ And Marshall Randles, writing in 1900, says that "since patristic times, it [divine impassibility] has been taken for granted in the theology of the great ecclesiastical denominations."²⁵

But not to rest the point merely on secondary sources, let me quote a representative, primary source from Hutcheson's time. The following is from William Beveridge (1637–1708), theologian and bishop of St. Asaph.

[God is] *without Passions* ...; that is, not subject to, nor capable of, those Passions of love, joy, hatred, grief, anger, and the like, as they daily arise in us imperfect Creatures; but he is always the same unmoveable, unchangeable, impassible God: And therefore in all our Contemplations of his divine Essence, we are not to conceive of him, as One passionately rejoicing in, or greiving for any thing

²¹ This doctrine is the subject of a vast contemporary literature. Predictably, definitions of it not only abound but also vary. I especially like this one: "DDI asserts that *God does not experience emotional changes either from within or effected by his relationship to creation*. He is not changed from within or without; he remains unchanged and unchanging both prior and subsequent to creation" (Theology Committee of the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America, "A Position Paper Concerning the Doctrine of Divine Impassibility," <<http://arbca.com/divine-impassibility-section-1>>, April 15, 2015). For further representative definitions see Marcel Sarot, *God, Passibility and Corporeality* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992), p. 30; and T. G. Weinandy, "Impassibility of God," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Detroit MI: Thomson/Gale, 2003), vol. 7: 357-60, at 357.

²² Useful recent discussions of the debate, each with many references, include Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2000); Rob Lister, *God Is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion* (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2012); and Anastasia Scrutton, "Divine Passibility: God and Emotion," *Philosophy Compass* 8 (2013): 866-74.

²³ Thomas Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?," *First Things* 117 (2001): 35-41, at 35.

²⁴ Paul Helm, "B. B. Warfield on Divine Passion," *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 (2007): 95-104, at 95.

²⁵ Marshall Randles, *Blessed God, Impassibility* (London UK: Charles H. Kelly, 1900), p. 8.

whatsoever, as we do, but as a pure and perfect Essence, as without Body and without Parts, so without Passions too; and such Contemplations as these are, both Scripture and Reason will give us warrant for. ... [For instance,] it is impossible there should be any motion or mutation in God; for inconstancy and mutability are imperfections Again, if God should be mov'd or chang'd, he must be chang'd either from better to worse, from worse to better, or from equal to equal [in which case] he would not be God absolutely perfect.²⁶

Beveridge is not saying that we speak falsely if we attribute love, anger and the like to God, but rather that God does not experience such emotions “as they daily arise in us imperfect Creatures.” For as they arise in such creatures, they involve fluctuations, motions, mutability. Beveridge’s emphasis is on the *unchangeable* nature of God’s inner life.

Note that Beveridge believes not just that God is impassible, but that God is impassible owing to his other attributes, such as his simplicity (he is “without Parts”), perfection, and immutability. This belief has traditionally gone hand-in-hand with the impassibility doctrine. It was no less orthodox in Hutcheson’s day than the impassibility doctrine itself.²⁷

In the quoted passage, Beveridge is explaining the first of the *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* (1562–63), the doctrinal statement of the Church of England.²⁸ Specifically, he is explaining part of its first sentence: “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions.” Similar words appear in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), a key doctrinal statement of Calvinist Christianity.²⁹ Its second chapter begins thus: “There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable.” It is generally thought, and was thought in Hutcheson’s day, that the doctrine of God’s impassibility is implicit in these passages. Helm makes this point in the statement I quoted from him; the same point is made by many others.³⁰

The fourth part of my answer is that the impassibility doctrine implies that when we encounter biblical passages which, on the surface, suggest emotional

²⁶ William Beveridge, *An Exposition of the XXXIX Articles of the Church of England. Article the First* (Oxford UK: R. Smith, 1710), pp. 15, 18. Similar statements appear in other works of this period. A pristine example is William Nicholls, *A Commentary On the First Fifteen, and Part of the Sixteenth, Articles of the Church of England* (London UK: n.p., 1712), p. 10 note f.

²⁷ For illustrations in addition to the passage from Beveridge, see Nicholls, p. 10 note f; Gilbert Burnet, *An Exposition of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England*, 3rd ed. (London UK: Chiswell, 1705), p. 27; and the earlier quotation from Hutcheson’s *Synopsis of Metaphysics*.

²⁸ Widely available, e.g., at <<http://www.reseminary.edu/files/39articles.pdf>>.

²⁹ Widely available, e.g., at <http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/>. Similar words appear in several other confessional documents, such as the Irish Articles of 1615 and the Savoy Declaration of 1658. See Samuel Renihan, ed., *God without Passions: A Reader* (Palmdale CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2015), ch. 6.

³⁰ See, e.g., Warren McWilliams, *The Passion of God* (Macon GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1985), p. 14; J. K. Mozley, *The Impassibility of God* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1926), p. 126.

change in God, we must interpret them figuratively—that is, in a way that implies no changes in God’s inner life. This observation is common in our day, and was equally common in Hutcheson’s.³¹ For example, does God rejoice and grieve? Beveridge would say yes, but only if those words “denote something in him [God], which we cannot apprehend, but by the dark Resemblance, that these Passions [human joy and grief] have unto it.”³² William Nicholls (1664–1712), another defender of the impassibility doctrine, would also say yes, but add that “we must understand these Expressions as being Condescensions made to our Capacities, and are only Representations of the [immutable] Tendencies of the Divine Will, by the Idea we have of our own Inclinations.”³³ Finally, to give a helpful contemporary example, Thomas Weinandy would say yes, but caution that this

is not to denote an emotional change within God, but rather to accentuate his unchangeable and all-consuming love. ... Such references to God’s emotional changes of state are not then expressions of God actually experiencing first pleasure and then sorrow, or joy and then suffering; rather, they express the reality of his unchanging love which is experienced differently depending upon historical situations and circumstances.³⁴

I do not claim that this stance on biblical interpretation, this injunction to read figuratively such passages as Jeremiah 32:41, brings no unclarities or difficulties. My point about it is that it has long been regarded, reasonably, as an upshot of the doctrine of divine impassibility.

The fifth part of my answer derives from the previous four. It relates them to the puzzle about NB, the premise that God does not benefit himself from rewarding the virtuous. Firstly, in the early editions of his *Inquiry*, why does Hutcheson advance NB without argument? The answer, I believe, is that he intends his theological objection for educated Christians, mainly those of a typical, or orthodox, sort. He reasonably assumes that they will accept NB without argument, regarding it as an upshot of divine impassibility.

Secondly, in the editions of the *Inquiry* following the publication of Clarke’s *Foundation*, why does Hutcheson continue to advance NB without argument, ignoring Clarke’s challenge to NB? The answer, I believe, is that on a natural reading, Clarke’s challenge amounts to an undefended denial that God’s major attributes make God impassible, and an equally undefended denial

³¹ In addition to the quotations below, see Helm, p. 95; Burnet, p. 27; and Mark Smith, “‘Only the Non-Suffering God Can Help’: Recovering the Glory of Divine Impassibility,” *Churchman* 126 (2012): 147-62, at 149, 150-51. See Renihan for an excellent collection of original sources on this matter, many from Hutcheson’s time.

³² Beveridge, pp. 16-17.

³³ Nicholls, p. 10 note f.

³⁴ Weinandy, “Impassibility of God,” p. 358.

that given God's impassibility, we must read many biblical passages figuratively.

Recall, for example, that Clarke's main point—or what naturally appears as that point—is that God's happiness can change, that it increases when God makes the virtuous happy. To say this of God is to deny that God's main attributes make him impassible. It is thus to deny a position which, in the minds of Hutcheson's intended audience, has immense support, including a preponderance of theological authority.

Of course, to deny that position is not out of line, given a plausible argument for doing so. But Clarke's challenge to NB includes no such argument. It includes such claims as that Clarke "know[s] not" why certain biblical passages, those that depict God as delighting in mercy, should not be taken literally. It would be a long stretch, however, to consider such claims arguments, as opposed to mere professions of how Clarke sees things. Very likely, then, Hutcheson feels no need or duty to answer Clarke's challenge. That he is silent about it is unsurprising.

I believe I have answered charitably and plausibly (even if somewhat speculatively) the puzzle about NB, Hutcheson's premise that God does not benefit himself by rewarding the virtuous. Given the facts I have presented, it is understandable that Hutcheson advances NB without argument, and continues to do so even after Clarke's challenge to it.

In saying this, I am not faulting Clarke for his challenge. I can think of feasible ways to interpret Clarke charitably, the boldest of which sees him as holding the impassibility doctrine and believing that his words somehow comport with it. But the most obvious way is to read him as rejecting the impassibility doctrine and expecting some of his readers to do likewise—or at least to do likewise upon reading his challenge. After all, in our own time, even if not in Clarke's, many expert theologians—Anglican, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and so on—reject the doctrine of divine impassibility.³⁵ Also, they often do so on grounds that stem from no facts or theories unavailable in Clarke's time.³⁶ So perhaps Clarke rejects the doctrine on similar grounds, and expects at least a few of his Christian readers to do likewise. I find no explicit evidence of this in his writings, but nor do I find evidence against it.

Additionally, I find nothing odd in the idea that Clarke would pen a challenge to NB likely to convince only a few Christian readers. Clarke regards

³⁵ For extensive lists of such theologians, see Lister, ch. 5; Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?," p. 35; and Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, ch. 1.

³⁶ Note that I say "often," not "always." Some prominent defenses of divine passibility derive from twentieth-century process theology or reflections on the Holocaust. (For useful discussion, including many references, see Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, pp. 2-6, 19-25.) Others, however, including scriptural and philosophical defenses, are not crucially tied to things that come after Clarke's time. See Lister, ch. 5; Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, pp. 6-19; and Richard E. Creel, "Immutability and Impassibility" in Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper, and Philip L. Quinn, eds., *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 322-28, at p. 324.

Hutcheson's moral theory, including its critique of egoism, as harmful to Christianity—indeed, as a possible “Occasion to the Enemies of Christianity, to Triumph and Ridicule it.”³⁷ So it is no surprise that Clarke, a Christian, would reach for most any argument that might persuade Christian readers, even if just a few, to reject Hutcheson's philosophy.

Finally, the things just said are consistent with my answer to the puzzle about NB. We can read Clarke charitably and still maintain, plausibly, that to the great majority of educated Christians in Hutcheson's day, Clarke's challenge to NB would seem a undefended denial of a soundly supported doctrine. This makes it unsurprising, even if not inevitable, that Hutcheson would ignore Clarke's challenge. Few philosophers reply to every challenge their arguments receive. The challenges likely to be ignored include those that appeal to no sizeable audience.

6.

My discussion thus far may raise a question. Allow me to discuss it briefly before concluding.

Earlier I mentioned a practice of reading figuratively certain biblical passages—those that suggest that God's emotions can change. A similar point goes for passages that suggest that God has *desires*. We find a long tradition of reading them figuratively, on the grounds that God's “desires” can be nothing like the mutable, human psychological states that we strictly mean by desires. Also, this tradition was orthodox among Christians of Hutcheson's era.³⁸

These facts suggest a new challenge to Hutcheson's theological objection, “new” in that it differs from Clarke's. It concerns the following of Hutcheson's premises:

If it is reasonable to think that God has fundamental desires for the happiness of others, it is reasonable to think that we humans are capable of such desires.

Although Hutcheson does not word the premise exactly this way—for instance, he uses the words “loves” and “dispositions” rather than “desires”—he clearly holds it.³⁹ And the challenge to it is that because God has desires only

³⁷ Clarke, p. 107. Hutcheson's critique of psychological egoism supports, indirectly at least, his view that benevolence is the essence of moral virtue. Clarke considers that view greatly at odds with Christianity. It implies that to act from hope of divine reward is not virtuous. See Clarke, pp. 48-50, 105-112.

³⁸ See Renihan, both the sources he includes and his introduction, especially pp. 21-34.

³⁹ In mentioning the words “loves” and “dispositions” I am looking at my quotation (in section 2) of Hutcheson's theological objection—at the penultimate sentence in its first paragraph. I say that Hutcheson “clearly holds” the premise stated above because the target of his theological objection is psychological

figuratively, the consequent of the premise receives no support from the antecedent. The consequent, after all, concerns human desires; the antecedent concerns divine ones.

This new challenge leads to the following question about Hutcheson's theological objection: Given that the new challenge reflects Christian orthodoxy, and that Hutcheson is writing for educated Christians, why does he advance the above premise without argument?

A plausible answer is available. Firstly, among Christians of Hutcheson's place and time, the familiar Calvinist view that human nature is totally corrupt, and thus indescribably different from God's nature, was not quite as prevalent as it had been many decades earlier. A more moderate view had gained ground, partly owing to the writings of the seventeenth-century latitudinarians, especially the Cambridge Platonists.⁴⁰ According to this view, although our nature is indeed terribly fallen, we are God-like to some degree, or at least capable of being so. This view turns up commonly in the religious literature of Hutcheson's day:

As Corrupt as our Nature is, we have nothing *Substantial* in us but what is Good, and a great deal that is Excellent, being made in the Image and Likeness of God, which still in great Measure shines forth in us.⁴¹

Of that *Image of God*, in which Mankind was Originally created, ... there remains a plain Tract, and many Foot-steps may still be discerned. ... Mankind is not so wholly degenerated from his Original Excellency ... There are yet left some Seeds of Grace in our Souls, which if cultivated and improved; the *Image of God* will be daily renewed in us; we shall increase in Vertue, and grow more and more like God.⁴²

egoism, which, as Hutcheson knows, is a thesis about desires. See the first sentence in my quotation of Hutcheson's theological objection. See also IBV2 138; IBV3 133, 137-41, 147-48, 151.

⁴⁰ Edifying discussion of this point is in Gill; also in Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660-1780. Volume I: Whichcote to Wesley* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), chs. 1 and 2. The latitudinarians were members of the Church of England, virtually all of them clergymen, who shared a cluster of tenets that proves difficult to define. The following definition is representative: "The term 'latitudinarianism' generally signals a broad churchmanship, willing to accommodate some degree of doctrinal and liturgical heterogeneity in pursuit of a common ground of popular Protestantism, anti-Calvinist moral theology, and what was sometimes called 'reasonable' Christianity" (Brent S. Sirota, *The Christian Monitors: The Church of England and the Age of Benevolence, 1680-1730* [New Haven CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2014], p. 20). The Cambridge Platonists, generally seen as the first generation (or else the forerunners) of the latitudinarians, include Benjamin Whichcote (1609-83), Henry More (1614-87), and Ralph Cudworth (1617-88) as key figures. Other notable latitudinarians include John Wilkins (1614-72), Isaac Barrow (1630-77), John Tillotson (1630-94), and Joseph Glanvill (1636-1680).

⁴¹ John Norris, *A Practical Treatise Concerning Humility* (London UK: S. Manship, 1707), p. 25.

⁴² Lewis Atterbury, *Twelve Practical Discourses on Several Subjects* (London UK: T. Warner, 1720), pp. 181-82.

We are not capable of being very like God, in his Omniscience, or his Almighty Power, but we are very capable of being like him in his Goodness.⁴³

No man is really despicable. ... Every man living hath stamped on him the venerable image of his glorious maker, which nothing incident to him can utterly deface. ... Every man is of a divine extraction, and allied to heaven by nature and by grace; as the son of God, and the brother of God incarnate.⁴⁴

Secondly, it is fair to assume that Hutcheson is writing for those who accept the moderate view just mentioned. In other words, he intends his theological objection for readers who grant a significant, even if distant, similarity between human and divine nature. He thus expects them to grant that if God can nonselfishly act for the good of others, a presumption exists that humans can do the same, even if their motives only remotely resemble what actuates God.

But to grant this is to grant the essence of the premise mentioned shortly ago. I mean the premise that if it is reasonable to think that God has fundamental desires for the happiness of others, it is reasonable to think that we humans are capable of such desires. Fairly interpreted, this premise is not so much about psychological states as about the similarity, distant but still significant, between God's actuating principles and those that actuate humans. Hutcheson assumes, I believe, that because many of his readers grant this similarity, they will find his premise agreeable. This is why he advances that premise without argument.

Clearly, I am speculating to some extent—a measure of speculation is unavoidable here. Even so, I have offered a plausible and charitable answer to the question raised in this section. It resembles my answer to our earlier puzzle about NB, the premise that God receives no benefit from rewarding the virtuous. Both answers refer to theological currents of Hutcheson's time and place. What comes to light from these answers is that given the readers for whom Hutcheson is likely writing, his theological objection has considerable force. It employs premises acceptable to his audience, and plausibly deploys them against psychological egoism.

7.

Although it is trite, it is also true, that when interpreting a philosopher a common mistake is that of reading the philosopher out of context, with the likely result that one draws an uncharitable conclusion. The uncharitable conclusion in this case would be that by asserting NB without argument, not

⁴³ John Adams, *A Sermon Preach'd before the Queen at Windsor, September 14. 1707* (London UK: H. Hills, 1709), pp. 9-10.

⁴⁴ Isaac Barrow, *The Works Of the Learned Isaac Barrow, D. D.*, 3 vols, ed. John Tillotson (London UK: James Round, et al., [1683–86] 1716), vol. 1: 255.

only before but after Clarke's challenge to it, Hutcheson errs in a way that ruins his theological objection to egoism.

This interpretive mistake is indeed common. And the best way to avoid it is simply to resist falling into it, that is, to attend to such things as the intellectual setting—philosophical, theological, and so on—in which the philosopher is writing. To do so in the present case is to see that very likely, Hutcheson's assertion of NB without argument represents no error, but rather a reasonable confidence that even despite Clarke's challenge, Hutcheson's intended readers will accept NB. This, in turn, reflects a sensitivity to theological assumptions of Hutcheson's place and time. These facts not only protect Hutcheson from an uncharitable charge, but remind us of the crucial importance of context to the study of the history of philosophy.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ I am grateful for comments and suggestions from anonymous reviewers and from Chad Carmichael, Thomas J. Davis, Jason T. Eberl, Samuel Kahn, and William J. Wainwright.