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EMPIRICISM AND WESLEYAN ETHICS

by

Kevin Twain Lowery¹

The term “Wesleyan ethics” is somewhat nebulous for several reasons. First, Wesley never systematized his own views on ethics. In fact, Wesley was seemingly not very concerned with systematizing his thought in general. Of course, he did maintain particular theological and intellectual commitments throughout his life, and these formed the backbone of his thought. Nevertheless, he did not focus on producing a systematic theology or a system of ethics. This permits any field classified as “Wesleyan” a significant amount of latitude in the ways that it interprets and develops Wesley’s thought. This breadth is even greater when we consider Wesley’s eclecticism, for he rather freely appropriated concepts from a wide variety of sources.

Consequently, Wesleyan ethics is a relatively open field. Attempts to articulate a system of Wesleyan ethics have been few, and given the parameters already mentioned, it would be virtually impossible for any one expression of Wesleyan ethics to be regarded as definitive for the tradition as a whole. As a result, it is not uncommon for Wesleyans to generate a rather broad spectrum of positions on any given ethical issue. Indeed, this pattern is evident within United Methodism, and the spectrum is wider still when we consider the broader family of Christian traditions that all trace their lineage through Wesley. Some may find this lack of definition disconcerting, but I believe that it allows sufficient latitude for the tradition to

¹I express my appreciation to Craig Boyd, Eric Manchester, Tom Oord, and Bryan Williams for their affirmation and helpful comments on this paper.

develop and to adapt to any cultural setting, thus ensuring its potential relevance in the long run. All of this is, of course, dependent upon constructive dialog between a plurality of Wesleyan voices.

This is not to suggest that any and every ethical stance and methodology can be regarded as Wesleyan, for there are distinctive theological and intellectual commitments that define what it means for ethics to be Wesleyan. For example, Wesley's emphasis on the centrality of the Love Commandments and his concern with the perfection of the individual make it necessary for any account of Wesleyan ethics to give due consideration to Christian virtues and the ways that they are inculcated, fostered, and expressed within the lives of individual believers. It thus seems that virtue ethics should be a central part of Wesleyan ethics, regardless of how it is articulated otherwise.

A number of eighteenth-century moral theorists, especially those within the British empiricist tradition, asserted that the ethicality of actions lies primarily in the motives behind them and not so much in the effects they produce. Wesley clearly followed this trend as is reflected in his definitions of sin and perfection. He believed that sin is a matter of intention, and he understood perfection to entail the refinement of motives.² Aside from some occasional casuistry, Wesley did not give significant attention to the systematic evaluation of the practical effects of actions. This is precisely the place where Wesleyan ethics must be bolstered, for it is not enough to say that all of our actions must be motivated by love for God and love for neighbor. We need to be able to determine what the most loving action would be in a particular situation. In essence, virtue ethics cannot truly stand on its own, for it requires an account of the good. Just as Aristotle's virtue ethics is supported by utilitarianism and Aquinas's virtue ethics is supported by natural law theory, so is Wesleyan ethics in need of a support system for its account of virtue.

In my opinion, there are a number of approaches that can be taken, and yet only those that remain consistent with Wesley's principal intellectual commitments should be regarded as Wesleyan in the fullest sense of the word. This is what distinguishes mere appropriations of thought from

²Wesley to Elizabeth Bennis, 16 June 1772, *The Works of John Wesley*, edited by Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 12:394; Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," §3, *Works* [Jackson ed.], 11:367; Kevin Twain Lowery, *Salvaging Wesley's Agenda: A New Paradigm for Wesleyan Virtue Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock), 287-93.

the intellectual development of that thought. Wesley has several commitments that should be taken into consideration, but I would like to focus on the Wesleyan epistemic commitment to empiricism. Wesley's identity as an empiricist and the influence of Aristotle and Locke on him are well documented and generally accepted, so it will not be necessary to repeat any of that material here.³ Rather, my specific purpose will be to briefly outline the ways that empiricism potentially impacts Wesleyan ethics.

I must admit that my own reasons for embracing empiricism have little to do with Wesley. I would be an empiricist even if I believed that Wesley was a Quietist. The fact that Wesley was an empiricist is a significant part of his appeal to me. His commitment to empiricism may not have been as strong as mine, but much of that is just the difference in intellectual climate between the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries. Wesley may not have been preoccupied with epistemological questions, but he gave them a fair amount of attention for a clergyman of his day. In this post-modern era, it is even more important that we give them due consideration, especially since epistemology is foundational to our perceptions and beliefs. I thus will briefly outline some basic ways that Wesleyan ethics is impacted by a commitment to empiricism. In order to do this, I first will need to discuss what it means for ethics to be understood from an empirical perspective.

Moral Discernment as Empirical

Obviously, empiricism is the view that all of our beliefs are rooted in sensory perception. Some people embrace empiricism more generally, but they consider ethics to be a special case. This was indeed part of the debate among eighteenth-century British ethicists, as a number of them described conscience as a "moral sense." The question concerns the extent to which moral judgment can be understood as the perception of an objective reality. Locke had noted, in a more general sense, that our minds form ideas from the objects we perceive, and the ideas are distinct from the objects from which they originate.⁴ For example, when I look at a tree, I form my own idea of that tree from my perception of it. On one hand, I can regard my idea of the tree to be objective, because it is formed from the percep-

³See Lowery, 65-121.

⁴John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, collated and annotated by Alexander Campbell Fraser, §2.1 (New York: Dover, 1959), 1:121-43.

tion of a real object. On the other hand, there is still some subjectivity in my idea of the tree since I can only perceive it from a particular perspective. This is akin to Kant's distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal, and epistemological discussions that occurred several decades earlier anticipated this distinction.

The British empiricists were willing to trust their perceptions of material objects, but they were more skeptical about moral discernment. They wanted to regard moral judgment as a type of perception, i.e. they wanted to believe that, when we judge something to be right or wrong, we are perceiving some kind of objective property or characteristic. This would make morality objective and ultimately binding on everyone. Nevertheless, many of the British empiricists were willing to acknowledge that moral perception is much more subjective than the perception of physical objects. This is precisely what Kant refused to accept, and he reacted strongly against it by taking an opposing stance. He asserted that moral discernment is not empirical at all but is equally accessible and obvious to all persons.⁵ Whereas he tried to make ethics universal by making it transcendental, the empiricists started to view ethics as more relative, albeit still rooted in some kind of objective reality that can be perceived, whether that be natural law or human nature.

All of this discussion helps us to identify some ways that Wesleyan ethics (and ethics in general) is shaped by an empirical perspective. First, moral knowledge is not learned through mandated or intuited absolutes. Rather, moral knowledge is derived from empirical sources. Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace ascribes some degree of conscience to every human being, giving us both the responsibility and the freedom of moral deliberation.⁶ This is in stark contrast to those who stress human depravity to the point of being skeptical about the natural function of conscience, a skepticism that often leads to legalism and biblical literalism. By assuming that we cannot naturally discern good and evil, they conclude that we must be told what is good and what is evil.

⁵Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 112-5 [German (originally the Royal Prussian) Academy of Sciences edition, *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, 6:102-6].

⁶Wesley, Sermon 105, "On Conscience," *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 1:479-90 [Jackson ed., 7:186-94]. Also, see Lowery, 224-8.

Such should not be characteristic of Wesleyan ethics, at least from an empirical perspective. Moral judgment should be recognized as being empirically grounded. Consequently, it is affected by situation and perspective. Although ethics is rooted in human nature, the nature of social relationships, and the structure of the world, our discernment of ethics, like all of our judgment in general, depends upon the particular experiences we have had. We must judge based upon the data that is available to us. That is why education is so important, for it allows us to vastly expand the database of information on which we base our judgments. Wesley, Locke, and other empiricists all stressed the importance of education, including the inculcation of morals.⁷ Indeed, it is foolish to base one's judgment solely upon one's own experiences, because wisdom is gained through perspective and understanding. This holds true for belief in general, and it is true for moral reasoning as well. Moral judgment is best made by integrating as many sources as possible. Therefore, a Wesleyan commitment to empiricism should lead to the rejection of the notion of *sola Scriptura*, for even the understanding and interpretation of Scripture are affected by perspective. Biblical hermeneutics cannot and should not take place in a vacuum. Instead, it should be informed by information that is gathered and integrated from a wide variety of sources. This approach is reflected in Wesley's own eclecticism.

In addition, ethics from an empirical perspective encourages the scientific study of moral reasoning. After all, science is essentially our best efforts to understand the world and ourselves based upon the empirical observations we are able to make. To say that reasoning itself can be studied scientifically is to recognize our ability to think recursively, i.e., to think about the process of thinking. When Wesleyan ethics is grounded empirically, it can be informed by the natural and social sciences. Current studies in fields like genetics and cognitive science hold great promise for unlocking more mysteries for us, and ethics should take them into account.

Of course, we have not even considered what is perhaps the greatest challenge to empirically based ethics, namely, the question of the naturalistic fallacy, and there are many who claim that we cannot derive "what ought to be" from "what is." It is obviously beyond the scope of this essay

⁷Locke, §§1.2.2-8, 1:66-72; §§1.2.22-5, 1:87-9; Wesley, Sermon 69, "The Imperfection of Human Knowledge," §3.1, *Works*, 2:582-3 [Jackson ed., 6:347-8]. Also, see Lowery, 114-21.

to give a fully adequate response to this objection. Nevertheless, I will briefly make a few points that I consider salient. First, although empiricism does not require one to reject the notion that there are moral absolutes, it does require one to admit that the certainty of our beliefs can never be absolute. All of our beliefs are formed from a particular perspective and have some degree of subjectivity. Consequently, even if there are moral absolutes, we can never be completely certain that we know what those absolutes are. Even if we merely aspire to approximate the ideals we hold, we can never be absolutely sure that we know precisely what the ideals should be. Instead, any ideals we hold are simply projected outward and extrapolated from the values we hold. In the final analysis, the existence of moral absolutes is ultimately a moot question.

Does this eliminate or undermine ethics? Not in the least. It only requires the empiricist to see ethics teleologically, at least in the sense that we should strive to constantly improve, refine, and, if necessary, correct our moral reasoning. This is what empiricism requires of our beliefs in general. At any given point in time our reasoning is dependent upon the data that is supplied to it. Strictly speaking, we are unable to see things from the standpoint of “all things considered,” so we live within the parameters of “this much considered.” We can only try to extrapolate from the data that we have in order to predict possible outcomes for a particular course of action. This is the best that we can do, and so our reasoning (especially our moral reasoning) always has a certain degree of speculation and must therefore be corrected over time as we acquire more data. This is how knowledge proceeds as a general rule.

Ethics is concerned with higher-level questions of value, so it should guide the way other academic disciplines are conducted and utilized. However, ethics is more speculative than most disciplines because it is further removed from direct empirical observation. Ethics is based upon empirical observations, but the conclusions it reaches require a lot of interpretation, and this is where it becomes more speculative. Consequently, it needs to be informed by the other disciplines, especially those most directly derived from empirical observation, i.e., those requiring the least amount of interpretation. In this way, the progress of ethics as a discipline is similar to that of philosophy and theology, because all of them focus on higher, broader questions of value, meaning, and purpose. They address the questions that are the most important overall, but since they are further removed from direct empirical observation, they are more speculative and allow much more room for disagreement.

These characteristics of ethics help us to see the limitations within which it is able to progress. As a discipline centered on higher, broader levels of interpretation, ethics works with data that is highly complex, especially the complexities of human behavior. As a result, ethics does not benefit from feedback as quickly as other disciplines of knowledge. Yes, there is nothing to prevent conclusions from being formed after just a small number of observations, but these conclusions are tentative and subject to revision. We are generally aware of this limitation. It is the very reason we disdain stereotyping and prejudice and regard them as unfair.

The complexities of ethical scenarios are also problematic in the sense that the context of moral reasoning is always changing. The empirical sciences test their theories by controlling variables in order to repeatedly re-create the same experimental conditions. Ethical scenarios cannot be controlled and repeated in the same way. Even if they could, considering to do so would itself pose an ethical problem because this would push the use of experimental subjects much further than what are now considered to be acceptable limits. For example, would we really want to test the ethicality of marital fidelity by having subjects engage in adulterous behavior? Of course not. Since much moral reasoning takes place in the abstract, its usefulness is limited until the occurrence of real-life scenarios allow for its testing. Even then, each scenario is somewhat unique, so moral reasoning quite often cannot be tested directly through particular experiences. Instead, we must learn over time by analyzing the similarities and differences between individual scenarios.

This brings us back to the heart of the supposed naturalistic fallacy. Can we determine what ought to be from the empirical observations we are able to make? On one hand, we cannot achieve absolute moral certainty, no matter how many observations we make, because there are always possible exceptions to every law, goal, and virtue. On the other hand, we are able to achieve a sufficiently high degree of moral certainty from patterns that we are able to observe over time, and this certainty can be strengthened as more observations are made. When understood in this way, it seems that the naturalistic fallacy objection made famous by Hume and Moore is actually a variant of the problem of induction that Hume articulated so well. For example, Hume pointed out that even though we cannot know with absolute certainty that the sun will rise again tomorrow, it is reasonable to infer that it will, because the fact that it has for many, many years makes the probability of tomorrow's sunrise extremely high.

Consequently, it would be foolish to allow any possible doubt of tomorrow's sunrise to affect one's behavior.⁸ Along the same lines, even if we can never attain absolute moral certainty, we are able to attain sufficient moral certainty so as to guide our behavior. As we learn more over time, we are able to adjust our mores accordingly. To illustrate, even though women and racial groups have been oppressed for many centuries, it became evident enough that this oppression lacks justification, and so people began changing their mores in that regard.

No doubt some will object to the way I am construing ethics because it makes ethics consequentialist to a great extent. They will say that the end does not justify the means. My response is that this assertion rests on a semantic ambiguity. To be sure, the desirability of an end does not justify every possible means of attaining that end, and so, in that sense, it is true that the end does not justify the means. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that the results that are produced by a particular course of action determine the extent to which the course of action is or is not justified. I believe this in a normative sense, and I believe that this is the way moral reasoning actually takes place, regardless of how we attempt to justify it, theoretically or otherwise. What disqualifies a particular means to a desirable end are the side effects that either are produced or are likely to be produced. Whenever we care more about avoiding the undesirable side effects than we do about attaining the desired end, we will deem that particular means unjustified.

A well-known example from history will help to illustrate this. Toward the end of his life, Kant's universal understanding of ethics was criticized by a younger contemporary in an article he published. He posed the question whether it would be moral to lie in order to save someone's life. In the scenario he offered, a man fleeing from a killer seeks refuge in a home, and the killer shows up looking for him. The article suggests that lying would be the moral action in that particular circumstance, contradicting Kant's view that we should always act on universalizable maxims. Rather than concede this apparent flaw in his theory, Kant's rejoinder was that telling the truth would still be the moral thing to do. Ironically, Kant was not satisfied to simply argue that ethics is always universal. On the contrary, he weakly suggested that one should still tell the truth since the man may have secretly fled from the house another way, and lying may in

⁸David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, §4.1 (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1993), 15-19.

fact help the killer to find him outside. Perhaps realizing how silly this response seemed, he then asserted that the harm caused by creating a slippery slope for the justification of lying is worse than the harm of losing an individual life.⁹ Whether or not Kant realized it, he ended up justifying his position with an empirical observation.

In a similar manner, many a consequentialist has shown how moral dilemmas, no matter how rarely they might actually occur in real life, force us to seriously consider making exceptions to the laws, goals, and virtues that we use to describe ethics, and these considerations are based on empirical observations and value judgments. In the final analysis, the situations we face in real life have many similarities, and this enables us to simplify moral reasoning by generalizing ethics in some theoretical way. Nevertheless, our moral reasoning is still ultimately based on the possible outcomes that we see for particular courses of action. Even though moral dilemmas of the type offered by consequentialists are so rare that they do not seriously cause us to abandon the theoretical ways we construe moral reasoning, we do gradually adjust our moral theories and our value systems based on the empirical observations we make over time.

Wesleyan Ethics as Empirical

Allow me to briefly restate my general argument. I began by noting how Wesleyan ethics is rather open-ended, and this allows it to be developed in a number of ways that can still be regarded as Wesleyan or are at least consistent with basic Wesleyan commitments. We then recalled Wesley's allegiance to empiricism, and I stressed the importance of addressing epistemological questions. Next, I attempted to outline what it means for ethics to be grounded in empiricism, and I offered a simple justification for viewing ethics that way. In this final section it only remains to point out the various options that exist for developing Wesleyan ethics within an empiricist framework.

There are several options that can be eliminated from the outset. To start, empiricism moves Wesleyan ethics away from Divine command ethics. The Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace acknowledges the role of conscience, even more so when bolstered by a commitment to empiri-

⁹Immanuel Kant, "On a Supposed Right to Lie because of Philanthropic Concerns," published with *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 63-7 [8:425-30].

cism. Moreover, Wesleyan ethics places great emphasis on moral motive, and this stresses the need for motive to originate in one's own reasoning. It is good to freely choose to obey what one is commanded to do, but it is even better to choose the action without having to be commanded to do it. For example, it is good for children to clean their rooms whenever their parents ask them to do so, but it is even better if they clean their rooms without needing to be told to do it. Divine command ethics is thus at odds with the Wesleyan view of moral perfection, in which the individual learns to love as Christ loves and to think as Christ thinks.¹⁰ It is a more synergistic view of grace, one that places both the freedom and the responsibility of moral deliberation on our shoulders. Whereas Divine command ethics quite often tends toward biblical literalism, Wesleyan ethics is best served by a more flexible hermeneutic, one that is comfortable with interpreting some scriptural passages either contextually or allegorically.

The next option to be eliminated is Kantian ethics. This choice is rather obvious because Kantian ethics is diametrically opposed to ethics that is empirically grounded. Kant believed that empirically grounded value judgments are ultimately reducible to self-interest, and he felt that ethics must transcend self-interest.¹¹ Wesleyan ethics comes from the very British empiricist tradition that Kant was opposing. From the standpoint of empiricism, Kantian ethics is self-deluding because we cannot neatly separate our feelings from our reasoning. This is what the pragmatists stressed a century after Kant. Rather than try to deny personal feelings, Wesleyan ethics focuses on the moral perfection of motives, because motive and intention are at the core of ethics. Ethics is not merely a rationalistic exercise. Instead, it starts with proper love for God, others, and self. In recognizing our epistemic limits, the empiricist realizes that ethics is not a set of inflexible rules. Rather, moral reasoning is always contextual, connecting the particular perspective of the moral agent with the specific situation at hand.

Wesleyan ethics should also avoid moral intuitionism, whether it be mystical or otherwise. Ethics requires deliberation, and this is part of our moral duty. Consequently, we must accept responsibility for our moral rea-

¹⁰Albert Outler made a similar point about the incompatibility of divine command ethics and the pursuit of Christian perfection. See Albert C. Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), 81.

¹¹Kant, *Grounding*, §2, 45-8 [4:441-4].

soning and for the consequences of our actions. The empiricist realizes that moral education is important, because reasoning is most reliable when it is able to integrate much information from a wide array of perspectives. It is just as important to learn from the experiences of others as it is to learn from our own successes and failures. Of all the possible approaches to Wesleyan ethics, I believe that there are three that offer the most promise. All of these are fruitful options for empirical ethics, for they were utilized in this way by two of history's most notable philosophers: Aristotle and Aquinas.

1. Natural law theory. First, empirically based ethics can be expressed through natural law theory, and I believe that this is a viable option for Wesleyan ethics. Of course, it seems to me that the empiricist should not use the concept of natural law as an absolutist would, because our epistemic limitations prevent us from making such absolute claims. As I stated earlier, even if I believe that there are moral absolutes, I must admit that, since I am fallible, my understanding of those absolutes can never itself be absolute. Natural law can still be seen as an objective reality, but epistemic humility demands that we see the perception of natural law as an ongoing pursuit.

2. Virtue ethics. Second, Wesleyan ethics can be construed as a type of virtue ethics, and I spoke of this earlier. The Wesleyan emphasis on perfection in love can be understood through the development of various virtues, all of which describe different aspects of a person's overall personality and character. Empirical experience can inform the way we understand the virtues, and it is instrumental in ingraining the virtues into the psyche. In addition, virtue ethics emphasizes personal discipline and growth in a way that is very consonant with the Wesleyan understanding of moral progress and the means of grace.

3. Utilitarianism. Third, I believe that utilitarianism could also be appropriated for Wesleyan ethics.¹² Of course, this would require some nuance in order for it to be truly Wesleyan. God would be seen as the *Summum Bonum*, as he is in the thought of Augustine, Aquinas, and others.¹³ There would also need to be distinctions between various kinds of

¹²For example, see Wesley, Sermon 100, "On Pleasing All Men," *Works*, 3:415-26, Jackson edition, 7:139-46.

¹³St. Augustine, *On the Nature of Good*; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, §II.II.26.2.1-3 (New York, Benziger Brothers, 1948), 1289-91.

pleasure, similar to the categories of higher and lower pleasures spoken of by Frances Hutcheson and John Stuart Mill.¹⁴ The danger of utilitarianism is that it can be narrowly defined in an attempt to justify selfish egoism. However, appropriating utilitarianism would require us to think about the way that piety affects moral motive. For instance, is it more moral to love others solely for their own sake or to love them primarily (if not solely) for God's sake? Utilitarianism would likewise require us to think about the proper role of self-love, avoiding the two extremes of either supposing that it can be transcended or ignoring it altogether.

It may reasonably be objected that embracing empiricism may lead to what some would regard as its excesses. There is always this possibility, but I do not believe that this would pose a significant threat. For example, embracing empiricism does not require us to entertain any form of Pelagianism, as Locke appears to have done.¹⁵ What we now know about our evolutionary dispositions makes it absurd to suggest that any human being can be born in a state of moral neutrality, without any selfish inclinations whatsoever. Consequently, accepting empiricism does not require us to entertain such notions.

Empiricism also does not obligate us to give up metaphysics and become scientific naturalists like the logical positivists. Recognizing our epistemic limits does not force us to conclude that reality does not extend beyond those limits. We are not required to say, "If I can't experience it empirically, then it must not exist." Furthermore, empiricism does not preclude divine revelation. What it does require is that we recognize with Aquinas that all of our concepts are formed empirically, so we can only understand God through the use of analogy. God's existence exceeds our epistemic limits, so any perception we have of God is interpreted through the lens of empirical experience.

Finally, embracing empiricism does not necessarily lead to the emotivist view of ethics like that proposed by Ayer.¹⁶ The fact that we cannot

¹⁴John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (New York: Bantam, 1993), 144-50; Frances Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2006). Also, see Mark Strasser, "Hutcheson on the Higher and Lower Pleasures," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987): 517-31.

¹⁵Locke, §§ 1.2.3-4, 1:66-9.

¹⁶Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952), 102-14.

speak of ethics in absolute terms does not force us to accept utter moral relativism. We can still recognize objectivity and normativity in ethics as long as we do not ignore the subjective element of ethics. Empirical ethics rests on the hope of moral progress, attained as we learn from our experiences and then apply that wisdom to our future moral deliberations.