

Introduction

The relevance of the discussion of problems in philosophical psychology, or the philosophy of mind, to moral philosophy has been frequently emphasised in contemporary philosophy. Less frequently made is the claim that in eighteenth-century philosophy one can discover several examples of pioneering attempts to discuss problems in philosophical psychology which are of direct relevance to moral philosophy. However, apart from the philosophy of Hume, students of philosophy are not, in general, well acquainted with eighteenth-century philosophy. For this reason, this essay on the Concept of Benevolence focuses attention on discussions of benevolence which are to be found in the works of three British philosophers belonging to that century. These are Francis Hutcheson, Joseph Butler and David Hume. Discussions of benevolence figure prominently in the philosophy of all three. Moreover all three develop their philosophical psychology on the basis of very similar empiricist presuppositions, and although contemporary philosophy can no longer accept these presuppositions, their discussions, as this essay hopes to show, succeed in expressing valuable and relevant philosophical insights. Since it is confined to an examination of aspects of eighteenth-century philosophy, this essay is to be regarded more as a prologomenon to an analysis of benevolence than as an attempt at furnishing a fully developed analysis of the concept. Historical questions as to why discussions of benevolence became so prominent in the eighteenth century, or what influence this philosophical discussion had on practical philanthropy, are not discussed. Lack of space has precluded an examination of the more 'rationalist' approach of Kant to benevolence, to counter-balance the empiricism of the three British philosophers, Hutcheson, Butler and Hume.