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HUME

James A. Harris

Hume's moral philosophy is to be found in Book 3 of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (published a year after the first two books, in 1740) and in *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). Also important to a full understanding of Hume's ethics are some of the essays that he published in various collections from the 1740s onwards. Four essays on the views of the ancient schools concerning the nature of human happiness ("The Epicurean," "The Stoic," "The Platonist," and "The Sceptic") are especially significant, for there Hume appears decisively to distance himself from the didactic, "improving" agenda of both ancient moral philosophy and most of his contemporaries (see Harris 2007). The essay "Of the Standard of Taste," as its title suggests, is primarily a work of aesthetics, but its explanation of how principles of judgment develop out of sentimentalist first principles has been found useful by some modern Humeans as a means of rebutting excessively "subjectivist" readings of Hume's theory of moral judgment (see Wiggins 1998). The essay "On Suicide" provides a rare case of Hume directly addressing a question in practical ethics. In that essay Hume makes clear a deep antipathy to the moral code of the Christianity of his day. Passages in other writings on religion, notably the final sections of the *Natural History of Religion*, manifest the same hostility to religion considered as a basis for moral thought.

There are a number of contexts for Hume's ethics, but the most significant is perhaps the debate begun by Hobbes and then renewed by Bernard Mandeville about whether there is a foundation in human nature for moral judgment and moral motivation (for other approaches, see, e.g., Haakonssen 1996; Schneewind 1998; Gill 2006). Ridiculing Shaftesbury's picture of virtue as a natural development of innate dispositions, Mandeville, notoriously, had portrayed morality as a confidence trick played on the multitude by scheming politicians. Human beings are always and only selfish, Mandeville claimed, and they are only persuaded to behave as if with a concern for the interests of others in return for the flattery of praise from their superiors and their peers. Mandeville's views excited an extensive debate. His most important critic was Francis Hutcheson (see Ethics and sentiment [Chapter 10]). Hume's moral philosophy is best seen as an attempt

to negotiate a path between Mandeville and Hutcheson. Letters he wrote to Hutcheson (see Hume 1932: Vol. 1, 32–5, 36–40, 45–8, letters of 1739 and 1740) make it clear that he found elements of the older philosopher's position impossible to accept, and there are frequent soundings of Mandevillean notes in his moral writings. Nevertheless, Hume rejected the view that all actions are done out of self-love, and accepted a foundation in human nature for at least some moral distinctions.

Hume's approach to the issues raised by the debate between Mandeville and Hutcheson is self-consciously detached and, as we might say now, scientific. He presents himself as an anatomist of human nature, who brings to moral philosophy the methods of the "experimental" natural philosophy of Isaac Newton. He makes it clear that the success of his theories is to be assessed in terms of a combination of elegance and explanatory power. At the end of the *Treatise* he says that it would take an entirely different kind of book to demonstrate that the virtuous life is a life of happiness and dignity. The anatomist may assist the painter in the production of alluring portraits of virtue, but his work is very often in itself disturbing at best and hideous at worst. The distinction between anatomy and painting is explored at greater length in Section 1 of *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. There Hume describes the ambition of the anatomical moral philosopher in terms of the discovery of "some general principles, into which all the vices and virtues were justly to be resolved" (Hume 1975/1748: 15). Yet, like any good apologist for the inductive method, Hume warns his reader of the dangers of an excessive concern for theoretical simplicity: there is no reason to think that all of morality can be resolved into "one general principle." To pretend otherwise has been the error of much previous writing in ethics. Hume's project is to apply the experimental method to the basis of the distinction between virtue and vice in a more precise and sensitive way than forebears such as Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Butler, and Hutcheson. (For reliable and thorough treatments of Hume's moral philosophy, see Ardal 1966; Baier 1991; Mackie 1980; Norton 1982.)

***Treatise*, Book 3: artificial virtues**

Book 3 of the *Treatise* is structured around a distinction that Hume makes between those virtues that are "natural" and those that are "artificial." Unlike Mandeville, Hume accepts that there are virtues that are approved of immediately and without reflection: Hume's examples are "meekness, beneficence, charity, generosity, clemency, moderation, equity" (Hume 1978/1739–40: 578). These virtues are discussed in Part 3. In Part 2 Hume focuses on virtues approval of which arises only in the context of conventions established in order that social life be possible for creatures such as we are, limited in our benevolence, and living in conditions of scarcity. These are the "artificial" virtues of justice

(defined in terms of rules determining property and its transfer), promise-keeping, and allegiance. Such practices are not immediately recognizable as worthy of moral approbation. They only appear in that light when their utility for society at large becomes obvious. Hume displays some anxiety that he be properly understood when he terms these virtues "artificial": he does not mean that they are *unnatural*, for justice (for example) is so obvious and necessary an invention that it was inevitable that human beings would come up with it. "Tho' the rules of justice be *artificial*," he remarks, "they are not *arbitrary*" (Hume 1978/1739-40: 484). They may, in fact, be called *laws of nature*, in the sense of being practices that are absolutely necessary to beings who need, as we do, to live in society with each other. Still, they are the result of artifice, and are not, contrary to what Hutcheson had claimed for all virtues, practices that we instinctively appreciate as morally valuable.

Part 2 is by far the longest of the three parts of Book 3 of the *Treatise*, and there was surely a polemical point to treating the artificial virtues before the natural ones. Book 3 begins, however, with an airing of an issue that had been vigorously discussed in the first decades of the eighteenth century, whether moral distinctions are made by reason or by sentiment. Hume's case against the rationalism of philosophers such as Samuel Clarke and William Wollaston is rather cursory, and does little more than restate arguments that had already been made at greater length by Hutcheson. Hume raises the issue only to dismiss it as unimportant. Once rationalism is shown to be hopeless, and sentimentalism is left as the only sensible option, the real questions can be addressed: namely, whether moral sentiments are in every particular case "produc'd by an *original* quality and *primary* constitution" (as Hutcheson had claimed, and as Hume thinks is obviously absurd); and whether, having answered this question in the negative, we should go on to look for more general explanatory principles in human nature or "in some other origin" (Hume 1978/1739-40: 473).

Hume thinks he has a decisive argument to show that approval of justice, promise-keeping, and allegiance is not a function of any innate principle of human nature. He begins by laying it down as a maxim that the estimation of the moral worth of an action is always based on the motive upon which the agent acted. He then argues that no action is approved of simply on account of having been done out of a sense of duty. There has to be some additional source of value for the action: that is, there has to be something that explains why actions of that kind are what duty requires. And, according to the maxim laid down at the outset, that something would seem to have to be a motive to such actions, a motive that could be called *natural* in so far as it is, precisely, not a pure regard for duty as such. The problem is that actions done out of respect for justice, or out of respect for the importance of a promise, do not seem to have a motive over and above a regard for what duty requires. Hume considers three possible kinds of motive – self-interest, benevolent regard for society at large, and benevolent regard for particular individuals – and argues that in each case it is quite

implausible to think that acting on that kind of motive could be what gives just or honest acts their moral value. These three kinds of motive exhaust the possible *natural* sources for ascribing moral value to justice, promise-keeping, and also allegiance. Therefore the motive which is praised in the case of these virtues must be non-natural, raised in us by processes of inculcation and education that Hume proceeds to explain.

There are two stages to that explanation. The first presents a series of conjectures as to how human beings came to invent such things as rules determining property and its transfer, the practice of being bound by utterances of the words "I promise," and institutions of government. In each case, according to Hume, the key to explanation is self-interest. These practices developed as rational individuals figured out ways of coping with the problem that human beings need to live in society with each other while having good reason to think that other people will take advantage of them if the occasion presents itself. The needs that we all have make it rational for us to foster the convention of respect for the property of others. Hume emphasizes the role of rationality in the development of conventions regarding property: faced with the problem of the combination of our natural selfishness and the difficulty with which we extract what we need to survive from our physical environment, he says, "nature provides a remedy in the judgment and understanding, for what is irregular and incommodious in the affections" (Hume 1978/1739–40: 489). This is a reminder that Hume is very far from denying that reason has any role to play in the construction of morality.

Hume also emphasizes that a convention is something different from a promise. In fact, he argues, promise-keeping is itself a kind of convention, developed in order to facilitate exchanges of goods or services where there is a time delay built into the exchange. As an example of a convention as distinct from a promise, Hume, famously, gives the example of two men who get into a boat together in order to row it to where they both want to go. There is no need for the men to make promises to each other in order for them each to have reason to do his part in the rowing. Hume's thesis that rational self-interest drives the development of conventions is, however, susceptible of more than one interpretation. On one way of reading Hume, conventions such as the rules of justice are the product of enlightened reflection on the part of most or all members of a society about what is necessary to peace and stability of that society; on another reading, such conventions emerge as the unintended consequence of the interactions of agents thinking only about their own local and short-term interests.

What remains to be explained is how following the conventions that enable social life comes to be regarded as a distinctively *moral* matter. This is what is accounted for in the second stage of Hume's treatment of the artificial virtues. The key to Hume's account is the notion of *sympathy*. Sympathy attunes us to the harm done to victims of injustice and dishonesty, and the feeling of uneasiness which is the result of this sympathy is simply constitutive of moral disapprobation – so long as that feeling survives general reflection about the

consequences of that kind of action for society at large. Hume says more about how sympathy is brought to the level of generalized concern for all of society in Part 3. Part 2 leaves it as something of a puzzle as to how the invocation of sympathy solves the problem of the nature of the motive that is the object of moral judgment with respect to justice, promise-keeping, and allegiance. It certainly looks as though the motive for, for example, just actions cannot be anything other than self-interest, but it seems implausible that Hume's view is that the virtuousness of the just person lies in his or her prudence (but see Gauthier (1992) for a version of such a view). Some commentators have argued that with the emergence and embedding of conventions there arises a new kind of motive, the disposition to act in accord with conventions, and that that is the motive that is morally approved of (e.g., Darwall 1995: 207–43). Others have suggested that in the end Hume surrenders the supposed maxim that the virtue of an action lies in its motive, in favor of a broadly consequentialist approach to moral estimation (see Mackie 1980: 79–81; see also Cohon 1997).

Relevant to this puzzle is the striking fact that in his application of sympathy to the development of distinctively moral sentiments Hume several times expresses skepticism about the capacity of sympathy to *motivate* agents to act in line with its deliverances (see Hume 1978/1739–40: 500–2, 523, 533–4). More often than not, it would seem, we are just and honest and loyal because of a combination of the artifices and threats of politicians, how we have been educated, and a concern for our reputation. These passages hint at the fundamentally Mandevillean character of Hume's treatment of the artificial virtues, but also suggest that there is reason to see Hume as in fact uncomfortable with the traditional idea that a virtue such as justice is primarily a virtue of individuals. He appears to be moving towards the more distinctively modern view that justice is rather a virtue of institutions, approved of on account of their socially beneficial consequences.

***Treatise*, Book 3: natural virtues and natural abilities**

Natural virtues are those that are recognized as such without need for the prior construction of conventions. They are the subject of Part 3 of Book 3 of the *Treatise*. Hume's first move is to fill out his conception of the role of sympathy in moral judgment, and as he does so it becomes apparent that the natural virtues are not really approved of immediately and directly. On Hutcheson's view we are naturally disposed to be pleased by benevolence without needing to take into account the consequences of benevolent action. Actions done out of benevolent motives do of course tend to have beneficial consequences, but that is not why we approve of them (though it is why God has instilled in us the tendency to approve of them). Hume, by contrast, believes that there is good reason to believe that it is with the estimation of natural virtues as it is with the estimation

of artificial virtues (and also with the estimation of beauty): character traits, or “qualities,” such as benevolence and generosity and clemency “acquire our approbation, because of their tendency to the good of mankind” (Hume 1978/1739–40: 578). That is, he believes that the fact that such character traits do have a tendency to the good of mankind is what explains our moral approval of them. This is something that most of Hume’s contemporaries found objectionable. They wanted to believe, with Hutcheson, that what we morally approve of is recognized as *good in itself*, irrespective of its consequences. Hume in effect rejects both the notion of the good in itself and the notion of our possessing a faculty able somehow to detect it.

▫ Sympathy, then, replaces the Hutchesonian moral sense as the faculty of moral approbation and disapprobation. Hume goes on to argue, by a form of inductive enumeration, that all moral judgment can be analyzed into consideration of just four kinds of good: utility to self and to others, and agreeableness to self and to others. All character traits that we call virtues are approved of because they have one of these four tendencies. The difference between natural and artificial virtues is that benevolence, for example, is always agreeable to behold, whereas the exercise of an artificial virtue such as justice might in particular instances give us pain. The virtue of just acts is brought out only in so far as our focus is the consequences of general adherence to the convention considered as a whole. Hume considers and answers two objections to his theory. The first is that, while our capacity for sympathy with others varies according to the closeness of our relation to them, our moral judgments do not change in the same way: “we give the same approbation to the same moral qualities in *China* as in *England*” (Hume 1978/1739–40: 581). Hume replies that while it is of course true that our sentiments fluctuate in response to alterations of relation, we need to prevent the continual disputes that would arise if we always judged on the basis of our sentiments. So “we fix on some *steady* and *general* points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation” (Hume 1978/1739–40: 582). It is not perfectly clear, however, whether what Hume means is that we are able to correct our sentiments by such reflection, or whether what is corrected is simply the language we use to express our sentiments. The second problem Hume raises for his sympathy theory is that we can regard someone as virtuous even if his circumstances prevent him from actually doing anything either useful or agreeable. Hume replies that, given enough experience of them in other situations, the usual tendencies of character traits are sufficient for moral approval. This is an instance of the influence of “general rules” on our judgments.

▫ In the second half of Part 3 Hume’s attention moves from the distinction between artificial and natural virtues to the distinction usually made between *virtues* and *natural abilities*. Natural abilities are such traits as intelligence, knowledge, wit, eloquence, and even, it seems, cleanliness. Hume extends his sympathy-based theory of approval to these traits, and claims that in every case they,

too, meet with approbation on account of their usefulness or their agreeableness. The pleasure wit excites is of course different in kind (not just in degree) from the pleasure that is excited by benevolence; but then the pleasure that benevolence excites is different in kind (not just in degree) from the pleasure excited by justice. There is, Hume concludes, no deep division to be drawn between moral virtues and natural abilities. The question of whether or not natural abilities should be counted as virtues on a footing with justice and benevolence is, Hume says, “merely a dispute of words” (Hume 1978/1739–40: 606).

Hume of course knows that for many moralists the crucial difference between virtues and abilities is that an exercise of the former is supposed to involve choice and freedom of the will. So Hume uses his discussion of the matter to supplement the case made in Book 2 of the *Treatise* for the irrelevance, indeed harmfulness, of the notion of free will to understanding the basis of moral approbation and disapprobation (see Hume 1978/1739–40: 407–12). The concept of virtue, he argues, has no essential connection with the concept of the voluntary. No such connection was made by “the ancients,” who were happy to include among the virtues such “involuntary and necessary” qualities as constancy, fortitude, and magnanimity. Furthermore, moral distinctions arise simply from feelings of pleasure and pain, and, Hume says he believes, “no one will assert, that a quality can never produce pleasure or pain to the person who considers it, unless it be perfectly voluntary in the person who possesses it” (Hume 1978/1739–40: 609). And, as Hume reminds the reader, in order for an action to be taken as a genuine expression of someone’s character, there has to be the kind of constant conjunction between character and action that is what Humean necessitation amounts to, and that positively excludes freedom of the will. (For discussion of Hume on liberty, necessity, and the moral sentiments, see Russell 1995.)

An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals

Utility and agreeableness, considered as the determinants of moral judgment, are the main theme of the second *Enquiry*. (For accounts of the relation of the second *Enquiry* to Book 3 of the *Treatise*, see Abramson 2001 and Baier 2008.) Hume says that the goal of the book is to analyze “that complication of mental qualities, which form what, in common life, we call Personal Merit,” in order to discover “those universal principles, from which all censure or approbation is ultimately derived”; and the conclusion reached is “that Personal Merit consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, *useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others*” (Hume 1975/1751: 173, 268). In Section 1 Hume emphasizes that this is a “question of fact,” and that therefore “we can only expect success, by following the experimental method, and deducing general maxims from a comparison of particular instances” (Hume 1975/1751: 174). What he seeks to

establish through following the experimental method is not simply that it is true that benevolence, justice, and the rest of the virtues are either useful or agreeable. This no one denies. Rather, he wants to show that these things, and these things alone, are the origin of the merit ascribed to these qualities. Again, the target throughout is the idea that there are character traits and actions which are good in themselves, and known to be such without consideration of consequences. Hume himself uses the language of Roman philosophy in this connection: he says he wants to show that the analysis of personal merit can be conducted solely in terms of the *utile* and the *dulce*. What is implied by this way of describing his agenda is that there is no place in his moral philosophy for the notion of the *honestum*, what is good in itself, good even if no one actually regards it as good.

Throughout the second *Enquiry* Hume works at presenting his ideas in such a way that the reader is not distracted by their more unsettling implications. The distinction between artificial and natural virtues, for example, is not mentioned in the main body of the text. The section on justice restricts itself to proving that “utility is the *sole* origin of justice, and that reflections on the beneficial consequences of this virtue are the *sole* foundations of its merit” (Hume 1975/1751: 183). It is only in an appendix that Hume returns to the question of how conventions regulating property emerged amongst self-interested individuals, and even then the thought that justice might properly be regarded as *artificial*, in the sense merely of being the work of “reason, forethought, design, and a social union and confederacy among men,” is introduced in a footnote (Hume 1975/1751: 307). The distinction between moral virtues and natural abilities is also relegated to an appendix, as are discussions of the reason–sentiment controversy and the issue of the extent of human selfishness. The impression given is that Hume wants to move moral philosophy on beyond the debates of the early eighteenth century, and towards a properly scientific treatment of the principal question, that concerning the basis of the distinction that is ordinarily made between virtue and vice. Almost all of Hume’s contemporaries were as a result able to recognize that his main thesis was that utility plays a central role in the definition of virtue and vice.

Some readers of Hume detect a painterly and moralistic tone in the second *Enquiry* that is absent from the *Treatise*. And it might be thought that a book that describes how all of the virtues are either useful or agreeable could indeed do something to recommend virtue to those of its readers unsure whether virtue is always worth pursuing. But when in the final section of the book Hume raises the question of the nature of our obligation to act virtuously, it does not occur to him to frame that question in any other terms than those of self-interest, and the upshot of his answer is that, in fact, it is not possible always to show that acting virtuously is in our interests. This is obvious, Hume says, in the case of the virtue of justice. The “sensible knave” who free-rides on the generally law-abiding proclivities of his fellow citizens cannot be shown to be acting

irrationally. If his heart really does not rebel at the thought of his own viciousness, there is nothing that argument can do to persuade him to change his ways. It is on this rather disquieting note that the second *Enquiry* ends. (For discussion of the sensible knave, see Gauthier 1992; Baier 1992.)

Hume's legacy

Hume's reputation as a moral philosopher was shaped in the first instance by his deployment of the concept of utility. Adam Smith, for example, regards Hume's appeal to utility as the defining feature of his ethics (see Smith 1984/1759: 179–93, 327). Some of his contemporaries, including Thomas Reid, understood him to be a latter-day Epicurean, even though it was obvious, as Reid himself acknowledged, that Hume rejected the Epicurean claim that all action is motivated by self-interest (see Reid 1969/1788: 401–3). The secular character of Hume's ethics did attract some criticism, but not from his more philosophically sophisticated contemporaries, almost all of whom, even if they accepted the truth of Christianity, held that it was the task of the philosopher to look beyond religion for a grounding of the obligation to morality. What worried philosophers such as Reid and Henry Home, Lord Kames, was that demonstrating the basis of moral obligation did not seem to be among Hume's concerns – something that was shown clearly, they thought, by his treatment of the sensible knave. They believed that it was incumbent on the philosopher to vindicate the commonsensical belief that there are some things that are absolutely obligatory and others that are absolutely forbidden, and this Hume failed to do. To claim that virtue could be reducible to the useful and agreeable was in effect to give up on the notion of inviolable rights and perfect duties. It was found striking that the language of rights and duties is almost completely absent from Hume's writings on moral philosophy. This, of course, is precisely what recommended him to Jeremy Bentham, who gave credit to Hume for the discovery of the principle of utility (see Bentham 1988/1776: 51). Throughout the nineteenth century Hume was portrayed as an originator of utilitarianism, by both that school's advocates and its critics.

More recently Hume's main contribution to moral philosophy has been supposed to lie in "meta-ethics." Hume's importance, it was thought for much of the twentieth century, lies in his arguments against "realism" and his delineation of a form of subjectivist non-cognitivism. More recently still, Hume has been claimed by proponents of "virtue ethics" as the chief early modern exponent of the idea that the primary concern of philosophical ethics is not consequences or duty but rather defining the kind of character necessary to living a full and flourishing human life. The concept of virtue is of course at the very center of Hume's moral philosophy, and he certainly rejects the thought that the core notion of morality is that of duty. He also rejects important aspects of consequentialist ethics, including the idea that outcomes can be given a ranking

along a single scale of value. He has an interest in the complexities of character that is shared by many modern virtue ethicists. Yet Hume's sense of the many aspects of morality which are the work of human invention and artifice should not be downplayed. Much of morality is not in any sense "second nature" to us. On the contrary, it is the product of a long and complex negotiation between human beings and their circumstances, and, despite its history, needs constantly to be reinforced by social pressure and the more brutally coercive power of the magistrate.

See also Ethics and reason (Chapter 9); Ethics and sentiment (Chapter 10); Adam Smith (Chapter 12); Utilitarianism to Bentham (Chapter 13).

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