



HUMEAN ETHICS: A PRELUDE TO KANTIAN ETHICS

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David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, the British empiricist is the milestone in the philosophical world. He was a historian but after some years he created his interest in the field of philosophy. David Hume is without doubt one of the greatest philosophers to write in English. His elegant style complemented the depth and originality of his philosophical thought. The range of his work is wide, but he is best known today for his views on causation, induction, perception, personal identity and on the nature of morality. He agreed with his predecessors that understanding how and why things change is the only way to explain the past and that only knowledge of cause can help to dispel our most natural fears. He believed, however that many had misunderstood the precise nature of such knowledge, and had thus failed to benefit from it. He also held that it was not enough to examine the natural world; as the investigator human beings set out to know, but often in ignorance of their own contributions to a task. Hume argued that we are all governed much less by reason than has often been claimed, and are motivated essentially by our passion. Philosophy should begin, therefore, with an investigation into the nature of humanity, for this would also enable us to understand the nature and limits of our knowledge.¹

HUME'S INTENTION TOWARDS MORALITY

The general aim of Hume's philosophical work was to show that we can explain every facet beyond the realm of ordinary natural events related to one another in ways that can be discovered by means of scientific investigations. As a skeptic and empiricist, he tried to explain political and social matters and our most basic thought process of our scientific, moral, and religious beliefs without calling for god or soul, or any unique mental substance different from any other kind of material substance. He wanted to demolish our confidence in all ordinary beliefs and conviction. He concluded that reason is not the source of these beliefs and convictions. There is a controversy that has started of late, much better worth examination, concerning the general foundation of morals; whether they be derived from reason, or from sentiment, whether we attain knowledge of them by a chain of arguments and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense; whether, like all sound judgments of truth and falsehood, they should be the same to every rational intelligent being, or whether, like the perception of beauty and deformity, they be founded entirely on a particular fabric and constitution of human species.....²

Historically speaking morality is either prescriptive or descriptive. Some philosophers viewed that it is reason based and some say based on experience. Some



say it is inborn and some say it is judgmental, collective of experiences through ideas and impressions. Hume rejected all the views of his predecessors by putting forth his own views. For Hume, nothing is ever present to the mind but its perception; and that all the actions of seeing, hearing, judging, loving, hating, and thinking, falls under this denomination. The mind can never exert itself in any action, which we may not comprehend under the term of perception; and consequently that term is no less applicable to those judgments by which we distinguish moral good and evil, than to every other operation of the mind. Perception resolves into two kinds, viz, 'impressions and ideas'. This distinction gives rise to a question, with which we shall open our present enquiry concerning morals, whether it is by means of our ideas or impressions; we distinguish between vice and virtue, and pronounce all actions blamable or praiseworthy.³ Morality is a subject that interests us all. Hume's key term was impressions and ideas; Hume first shows that our ability to make moral distinctions, our ability to distinguish virtue from moral evil does not derive from reason and the manipulations of ideas of which that faculty is capable. Morality is not speculative, but practical.⁴ It is subjective and varies from person to person. It is hypothetical, not categorical and always subject to condition. Morals are neither *a priori* nor *a posteriori*. They are neither derived from reason nor from experiences, not by chance, but by choice. This is applicable but not necessary for all. Morals are derived from moral sentiments: feelings of approval (esteem, praise) and disapproval (blame) felt by spectators who contemplate a character trait or action. In the *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume divides virtues into natural and artificial ones. Artificial virtues depend on convention, contrivance, or rule-following. Their social utility may not be evident when a single act exhibiting an artificial virtue is committed in isolation. Rather, the beneficial nature of these virtues requires their being pervasively and consistently expressed throughout society in accordance with a general rule. Artificial virtues are not arbitrary; however they are necessary human inventions in response to the demands of broad social interactions. Natural virtues, on the other hand, includes bodily appetites such as hunger, thirst, and lust and instinctive mental passions similar to hunger or resentment have no need of rules or conventions for them to be useful or pleasing; additionally, they are useful or pleasing on each occasion.⁵ The "natural impulses or instincts" including desire of punishment, desire of happiness to our friends, hunger, lust, love of life, attachment to offspring, the desire to punish, fame, power, and benevolence. Among the artificial virtues, Hume includes justice, fidelity to promises, and allegiance to government, obedience to laws of nations, chastity, and modesty. Hume considers virtues such as cheerfulness, wit, or good memory neither specifically moral, nor much within the agent's control. Hume blames superstitions and false religions for the misguided views some have like the 'Monkish virtues' of celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, Self-denial, humility, silence, and solitude. They are, instead, vices.⁶

In *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, he distinguishes among virtues useful to others and useful to oneself. The virtues immediately agreeable to



oneself are cheerfulness, tranquility, benevolence, and delicacy of taste, and virtues immediately agreeable to others are good manners, politeness, wit, ingenuity, decency, cleanliness, and a graceful. Justice, fidelity, honor, and allegiance, chastity, along with the other social virtues of humanity, generosity, charity, affability, lenity, mercy, and moderation are the qualities of virtue which is useful for society as well as for human beings. These are wanting of order and method.

The resemblance that we recognize between ourselves and someone else, between us or our experiences to them and theirs, the easier it is for our imagination to convey their feelings to us, and more vivid is our sense of those feelings. One interesting thing about the operation of sympathy for Hume is that not only do we form an idea of the feeling of another, but this idea transforms into an impression. When we sympathize with the passions and sentiments of others, these movements appear at first in our mind as mere ideas, and are conceived to belong to another person, as we conceive any other matter of fact. *“Tis also evident, that the ideas of the affections of others are converted into the very impressions they represent and that the passions arise in conformity to the images we form of them.”*⁷ Some points he has mentioned regarding morality as follows:

MORALITY IS NATURALISTIC AND EMPIRICAL

According to traditional moralist it has some source of origination, which is based on some natural and original principles, that means morality is real, essential and founded on nature. As we know that Hume is an empiricist, his approach to ethics could be called naturalistic, empirical, or experimental. Hume’s ethics is part of his larger philosophical endeavor to explain naturalistically all aspects of human nature—not just what we can know of the world around us, but also how we make moral judgments and why we have religious beliefs. Hume’s ethics relies on and reflects his philosophy of mind, which is empirical in its approach. He intends to use the same experimental method in analyzing human morality that he uses in analyzing human understanding. Hume treats ethics, together with psychology, history, aesthetics, and politics, as the subject of his “moral science”. Hume often seems more interested in explaining morality as an existing natural phenomenon than in setting out a normative ethical theory. Hume rejects *a priori* conceptions of human nature and morality with an approach according to which everything about us is open to empirical investigation and to explanation in naturalistic terms. Hume often compares humans with other animals, tracing the bases of human morality to features we share with them. Hume talks about morality and virtue as independent of religion and the supernatural, and about moral action as part of the same physical world in which we reasonably talk of in terms of cause and effect.⁸

REASON HAS NO ROLE IN MORALITY

Philosophy is divided into speculative and practical; and as morality is always comprehended under the practical, it is supposed to influence our passions and actions



and to go beyond the calm and indolent judgments of the understandings. Since morals, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, and that they cannot be derived from reason, as we have already proved earlier. Morals excite passions that produce or prevent actions. Reason by itself is utterly impotent in this moral distinction. Reason is wholly inactive, and can never be the source of so active a principle as conscience, or a sense of morals. It determines the virtue on the ground of the usefulness or essence for mankind in their day to day life and makes a distinction between good and bad. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason. Reason is the discovery of truth or falsehood consisting in an agreement or disagreement either to the relations of ideas or to real existence and matters of fact. The merits and demerits of an action frequently contradict, and sometimes center in our propensities. We fancy the peace of society to be at stakes in every decision. Hume also directly argues that the key moral values are matters of social convention. Moral judgments principally express our feelings. Those judgments by which we distinguish moral good, which we may not comprehend under the term of perception; and consequently that term is no less applicable to evil, than to every other operation of the mind.⁹ The principal role that Hume gives to reason in ethics is one of helping agents see which actions and qualities are genuinely beneficial or efficacious. Reason makes inferences, but neither sets ends, nor motivates actions. Our ends depend on what we desire, which depends on what we feel (with respect to pleasure and pain). A feeling is the primary object of morality which motivates to act due to appetite or inclinations. Reason is essential to determine which character traits or modes and conduct conduce to it, which is very difficult with regard to the questions of artificial virtues, such as justice, since so many people are involved, and since the social benefits of these virtues can be expected only from collective action.¹⁰ Reason has other roles related to morality, too. For example, Hume notes that in order to make a moral judgment, one must have in mind all the relevant facts, and apprehend all the relevant relations of ideas. This takes reason. Reason, Hume maintains, can at most inform us of the tendencies of actions. It can recommend means for attaining a given end, but it can't recommend ultimate ends. Reason can provide no motive to action, for reason alone is insufficient to produce moral blame or approbation. We need sentiment to give a preference to the useful tendencies of actions.

MORAL JUDGMENTS ARE SENTIMENTS

As per Hume, virtue and vice are not discoverable merely by reason, or the comparison of ideas. It must be by means of some impressions or sentiments that we are able to mark the difference between them. Moral judgments are essentially the deliverances of sentiments. Morality, therefore, is more properly felt than judged because of our feelings or sentiments which is confound with an idea, We recognize moral good and evil by means of certain feelings: the calm pleasure of moral approval or the discomforting displeasure of moral disapproval, either of which may be felt in contemplating a character trait in oneself or another from an unbiased perspective.



Hume assumes that we all have the same moral feeling that is if we all take up the moral point of view, we will all agree in our approvals and disapprovals of various traits. The operation of our sentiments of moral approval and disapproval depend on sympathy, which allows the feelings of one person to be shared by others. Although Hume believes that only human beings experience moral sentiments, he believes that non-human animals also have sympathy, and thus share with us one of the essential foundations of morality. Morality is therefore, more properly felt than judged of; through this feeling or sentiment.¹¹

The sentiments that approve or disapprove are the characters and manners. The language of morals, which implies some sentiment common to all mankind, which recommends the same object to general approbation, and makes every man, or most men, agree in the same opinion or decision concerning some sentiment which is universal and comprehensive that extend to all mankind, and render the actions and conduct, an object of applause or censure, and agree or disagree accordingly with that rule of right which is established. These two requisite circumstances belong alone to the sentiment of humanity here insisted upon. It is the extended or extensive sentiment of humanity, benevolence or sympathy; that for Hume is ultimately the foundation of morals.¹²

MORALITY AS CHARACTER TRAITS

In Hume's ethics, character traits are the primary objects of moral assessment. Acts are judged derivatively, in relation to the traits assumed to cause them. As we know virtues are divided by Hume into Natural virtue and artificial virtue. The natural virtues are those traits that useful or agreeable of people whether or not they are living in a large society, whereas artificial virtues are those traits that emerge as useful or agreeable in social groups that go beyond families or small communities, and in which social cooperation is needed among people with few or no personal ties. Society is the foundation or basic ingredients for creating values. Values are not created by itself. The need of values are always for mankind, for the benefit of society where everyone shares his feelings, affections, anger and love are the expressions by the individuals because there is a community or a society. Right and wrongness is worthless for the person who is nomadic. The person who resides in an island for him there is no need of value. What he will do with value. What is the necessity of value for him? Value is related to huge numbers, not to a single people. Society is consists of as a whole. Natural virtues produce benefits or enjoyment with far greater reliability than artificial virtues. Only natural virtues are characteristically pleasing on all occasions of their expression. Artificial virtues benefit people not consistently on each occasion, but rather through their wide-spread practice over time throughout a community. For example a good composition of music and a bottle of good wine equally produce pleasure; and what is more, their goodness is determined merely by the pleasure. A good quality of an army is hurtful to us; but may still command to our esteem and respect. It is only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such feelings or sentiments, as denominating it morally



good or evil. Hume is disagreeing with traditional moralists about the source, form, content and role of morality, the primacy object of moral evaluation is “character”. “*If any action be either virtuous or vicious, 'Tis only as a sign of someone quality or character*”.¹³ Sometimes Hume uses “character” to mean “character trait” (as recognized by others), sometimes the “whole cluster” (economy of traits), that exists in the nature of things to match the standard of our judgments; what each man feels within himself is the standard of sentiment. Character traits themselves are stable dispositions to feel and thus to be moved to act in certain ways. We usually judge acts as virtuous or vicious based on our assessment of the traits that we think motivate them. Hume thinks that the basis for our approval or disapproval is due to the agreeableness or usefulness of the trait. Although each trait is assessed based on its usefulness or agreeableness both to the possessor and others, the standpoint from which one makes this assessment is a general one. Moral assessors take up a common point of view from which the assessor can appreciate how everyone who is affected by the object of evaluation (e.g., a character trait of a particular person) is affected by it. Against the moral rationalists, the academicians of moral philosophers who hold that moral judgments are based on reason, Hume maintains that it is difficult even to make their hypotheses intelligible. Reason, Hume argues, judges either of matters of fact or relations. Just as we make judgments about others, we are aware, from infancy, that others make judgments about us. We desire their approval and modify our behavior in response to their judgments. This love of fame gives rise to the habit of reflectively evaluating our own actions and character traits. We first see ourselves as others see us, but eventually we develop our own standards of evaluation, keeping alive all the sentiments of right and wrong, which begets, in noble natures, a certain reverence for ourselves as well as others, which is the surest guardian of every virtue. The general character of moral language, produced and promoted by our social sympathies, permits us to judge ourselves and others from the general point of view, the proper perspective of morality. For Hume, that is “*the most perfect morality with which we are acquainted*”.¹⁴ Morality never consists in any single matter of fact that could be immediately perceived, intuited, or grasped by reason alone; morality for rationalists must therefore involve the perception of relations. But inanimate objects and animals can bear the same relations to one another that humans can, though we don’t draw the same moral conclusions from determining that objects or animals are in a given relation as we do when humans are in that same relation. Distinguishing these cases requires more than reason alone can provide.¹⁵

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