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AN UNNOTICED ERROR IN HUME'S TREATISE

"...the conformity between love and hatred in the agreeableness of their sensation makes them always be excited by the same objects..."

Treatise, Book II, Part II, Sec. X.

This passage from Hume's A Treatise of Human Nature is taken from the first edition of 1739. It can also be found in the Everyman Edition, the editions of Selby-Bigge, Mossner, and Green and Grosse, without editorial comment of any kind. Yet it contains a glaring and obvious error. The most superficial reading of Book II will convince one that it is love and pride that conform in the agreeableness of their sensation: they are both indirect passions that are pleasant in feeling. On the other hand, humility and hatred share in being disagreeable or unpleasant impressions.¹

This might have been a printer's error, or Hume's own mistake, and the reason for it is not hard to find. This part of Book II was called "Of love and hatred"; the expression "love and hatred" recurs several times throughout the whole. In either the writing of the manuscript or the type setting of the text, a habit was established. Habit, which Hume himself used to explain so much else, must here be cited as the explanation of this slip.

What is more interesting is the reason why such an obvious error has gone so long unnoticed. Here an ambiguity in Hume's use of the word "object" should be noticed. It is sometimes used simply as a synonym for "thing" and this is the usage in "excited by the same objects". Hume is merely saying that love and pride have the same sorts of cause. When this cause is found in oneself it leads to pride and when in another it leads to love. This of course is connected with the fact that both these passions are agreeable or pleasant in sensation.

"Object" also has a special technical use in Book II when it refers to the person towards whom the passion is directed, as in "the object of the passion". Now love and hatred do have a similar sort of object, i.e. another person, whereas the object of pride and humility is, according to Hume, always oneself. In this usage, the object of a passion is carefully distinguished by Hume from its cause.

It is possible that a careless and superficial reading of this passage might lead one to think that Hume meant to say that love and hatred agree in having the same sort of object, i.e. another person. Such inattention is to be deplored, but after all, until very recently, such inattention was typical of the attitude of philosophers towards Book II as a whole.²

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1. See for instance the previous paragraph: "I have suppos'd all along, that the passions of love and pride, and those of humility and hatred are similar in their sensations, and that the two former are always agreeable, and the two latter painful."
2. Thanks are due to Mr. Roland Hall for checking the first edition on my behalf.