



### **Hume's Obligations**

Knud Haakonssen

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## HUME'S OBLIGATIONS

Hume's general theory of morals is mainly concerned with explicating moral good and bad, virtue and vice. And so it is not surprising to find that when, at the end of his Section '*Of the origin of justice and property*' in the Treatise he turns to the question of the moral quality of justice, the formulation is '*Why we annex the idea of virtue to justice, and of vice to injustice.*' (T498)<sup>1</sup> He does, however, have a theory of obligation as well, which is completely in line with his general theory; although he does not say very much about it, it is both clear and important.

Hume opens one of his most important paragraphs on obligation by stating the principle that ought implies can: *No action can be requir'd of us as our duty, unless there be implanted in human nature some actuating passion or motive, capable of producing the action.* (T518) We can only be under an obligation to do actions, the motives for which are within the range of natural human motivation.

He then goes on to spell out what this means for our idea of obligation: *This motive cannot be the sense of duty. A sense of duty supposes an antecedent obligation: And where an action is not requir'd by any natural passion, it cannot be requir'd by any natural obligation; since it may be omitted without proving any defect or imperfection in the mind and temper, and consequently without any vice.* (T518)

In other words, we have an obligation to perform an action (1) if the motive for this action is a natural human motive, (this is the principle that ought implies can, and it is a necessary condition for obligation); and (2) if our non-performance of the action is a sign that we are missing a quality in our character (and consequently a motive for the action), which it is a *defect or imperfection in the mind and temper* to be missing. What Hume means by *defect or imperfection* is strongly indicated on the previous

page:

*All morality depends upon our sentiments; and when any action, or quality of the mind, pleases us after a certain manner, we say it is virtuous; and when the neglect, or non-performance of it, displeases us after a like manner, we say that we lie under an obligation to perform it. (T517)*

The imperfection, of which the non-performance of an obligation is a sign, is thus a quality which is subject to a certain kind of displeasure, namely a displeasure which is similar to the pleasure which accompanies our perception of virtue. But now we know from Hume's general exposition of the emotional background to moral evaluation that this latter pleasure arises in conjunction with a peculiar indirect passion, which is closely akin to, and in a way nothing but a corrected version of love, and which we call moral approbation.<sup>2</sup> And this, of course, leads us to expect that the displeasure in question here arises in conjunction with the indirect passion which is akin to hatred and is known as moral disapprobation. That this is what Hume intends is strongly supported by a short treatment of obligation much earlier in the Treatise:

*When any virtuous motive or principle is common in human nature, a person, who feels his heart devoid of that principle\*, may hate himself upon that account, and may perform the action without the motive, from a certain sense of duty,...*  
(T479, my ital.)<sup>3</sup>

If we put all those pieces together, we can see fairly clearly what Hume's theory of obligation was. Obligation has to be seen against a background of the natural and common qualities of human character and the accompanying motives: if a man either lacks a certain quality, or in a particular situation does not have the common or natural motive, he may yet perform the action which this quality and motive would have led him to do, if he had had it; he

may see, if he looks upon the situation as men commonly and naturally do, i.e. as an impartial spectator, that then he will come to hate himself, in the sense of disapproving of himself, if he does not perform the action; on the other hand he will be pleased with, i.e. approve of, himself, if he does perform. And in this consists the sense of duty: *A man that really feels no gratitude in his temper, is still pleas'd to perform grateful actions, and thinks he has, by that means, fulfill'd his duty.* (T479)

And:

*Tho' there was no obligation to relieve the miserable, our humanity wou'd lead us to it; and when we omit that duty, the immorality of the omission arises from its being a proof, that we want the natural sentiments of humanity. A father knows it to be his duty to take care of his children: but he has also a natural inclination to it. And if no human creature had that inclination, no one cou'd lie under any such obligation.* (T518-19)

It will be noticed that I have above interpreted Hume's obligation as making up for motives which are natural and common. This latter description was used to indicate Hume's view that the natural principles in the human mind have conventional expressions, and that these can vary from time to time, and from place to place. In this way it becomes possible for him to reconcile the idea of a basically uniform human nature with the facts of historical and geographical differences.<sup>4</sup>

Also, we must not be led to believe that the regard to what is natural and common in our idea of obligation makes obligation the same as respectability. Although our idea of obligation is formed under social pressure, it only becomes moral obligation proper when the situation is viewed objectively and impartially, exactly as in all moral evaluation in Hume.

What we have presented so far is, however, only part of Hume's theory of obligation. For it is evident that as the theory stands above, it can only explain how a sense of duty can make up for natural motives, and thus why we have an obligation to perform natural virtues. But what we are particularly interested in is the obligation to perform artificial virtues. One can formulate the problem about those virtues in the following way. There are no natural motives to perform them, i.e. no motives which do not presuppose their existence as social institutions. But this means that the non-performance of them does not indicate any natural *defect or imperfection in the mind and temper*; accordingly one does not naturally come to hate oneself for not performing them and therefore there does not naturally arise any sense of duty to perform them. It is this situation which forces Hume to embark upon his detailed theories of how the rules of justice (including the institution of promises) emerge from men's individual self-interested actions, and how they - once in existence - are maintained through the same (but redirected) self-interest. And from this basis he is to explain how we come to attach a moral value to them. We can thus see how the whole plan is well suited to convey the idea of justice as something developing - as a natural growth, in the sense that it is non-arbitrary and has natural causes in man's nature and situation and as an unintended growth, in the sense that it is not rationally planned in any of the major turns of its development.

How do people come to hate themselves - and, of course, others - for not acting in accordance with the rules of justice, and thus to develop a sense of duty on top of the interest they have in such behaviour? In one central paragraph Hume invokes his principle of sympathy. He first points out that as society grows larger, the self-interested motive to observe the rules of justice grows fainter for the individual where his own matters are con-

cerned: a single exception to a so wide-ranging rule does not seem to do much harm. But this tendency is countered by the sympathy we have with others when they are being treated unjustly by some third person, as well as by the resentment we feel when we ourselves are the subject of injustice (this latter could, of course, be construed as spectator-sympathy with us):

*...tho' in our own actions we may frequently lose sight of that interest, which we have in maintaining order, and may follow a lesser and more present interest, we never fail to observe the prejudice we receive, either mediately or immediately, from the injustice of others; as not being in that case either blinded by passion, or byass'd by any contrary temptation. Nay when the injustice is so distant from us, as no way to affect our interest, it still displeases us; because we consider it as prejudicial to human society, and pernicious to every one that approaches the person guilty of it. We partake of their uneasiness by sympathy; and as every thing, which gives uneasiness in human actions, upon the general survey, is call'd Vice, and whatever produces satisfaction, in the same manner, is denominated Virtue; this is the reason why the sense of moral good and evil follows upon justice and injustice. (T499)*

By and by those individual cases of sympathy, and consequent moral approval/disapproval of just/unjust actions, grow into a general rule, which we fail not to extend ... even to our own actions. And this extension is supported by the fact that we naturally sympathize with others in the sentiments they entertain of us. (T499) With this last point Hume is undoubtedly thinking of our ability to become spectators of our own actions, and thus to come to evaluate them (or, rather, their motivation) by sympathy with their

effects (or, more correctly, their tendency).

All this seems very clear, and we readily allow Hume to draw his general conclusion:

*...self-interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice: but a sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation, which attends that virtue.* (T499-500)

But if we ask how we are to get the moral obligation to justice out of this account, we get into difficulties. For exactly what motive is missing if we behave unjustly? What motive do we come to hate ourselves for not having? It cannot be the sympathy with public interest, for sympathy is nothing but a principle of communication, and not a motivating force.<sup>5</sup> The obvious answer is that the motive is the one which we come to approve of through sympathy with its effect (or tendency). Now, the effect (or tendency) is the public interest. But the motive? Well, as long as the sense of duty is not established yet, the only motive is self-interest. But as we know that the motive is only taken as an indication of a quality of a character, when we evaluate morally, and as it is hardly likely that Hume thought self-interest, as a general character trait, morally approved by men (which, of course, does not entail that it is generally disapproved), the conclusion must be that there is no motive which we could come to hate ourselves for not having. It thus seems as if Hume fails to give us the motive which could form the link between the interested motivation for just behaviour and the moral obligation to such behaviour. He does not, however, fail us completely. For if we turn to his treatment of promises, we will find sufficient indications to allow us to fill in what is missing to make the theory coherent:

*The difficulties, that occur to us, in supposing a moral obligation to attend promises, we either surmount or elude. For instance; the expression of*

*a resolution is not commonly suppos'd to be obligatory; and we cannot readily conceive how the making use of a certain form of words shou'd be able to cause any material difference. Here, therefore, we feign a new act of the mind, which we call the willing an obligation; and on this we suppose the morality to depend. (T523, first italics mine)<sup>6</sup>*

If we draw in what we know from the case of justice, we can put the following interpretation upon this. When promising, motivated by self-interest, becomes a regular behaviour, and when we through sympathy with its beneficial tendency come to approve of this behaviour, then the natural tendency in men to see behaviour as an expression of motives, and motives as expressions of qualities of character, leads them to imagine that there is a natural motive (and thus a character trait), namely the willing of an obligation, behind promises; and it is thus this imagined motive they, through sympathy, come to approve of; and when they find that they - for very good reasons - do not have this motive themselves, they come to hate themselves, and this self-hatred creates the sense of duty to fulfil their promises. Or in other words, certain actions done out of a morally neutral motive (self-interest) have on the whole so good consequences, and seem so clearly 'aimed' at those consequences, that men naturally come to imagine that there is a specific motive for the actions which directs them towards those consequences; they naturally come to approve of this non-existing motive and to hate themselves for not having it - and this self-hatred is the magic formula, for it constitutes the real moral motive to do justice and fulfil promises, namely our sense of duty.

Let me stress that this suggestion about the imagined motive is a construction of mine. I put it forward for the following reasons.

(1) It is needed at a vital turn in Hume's argument, namely the development of moral obligation out of interested motivation.

(2) There is the quoted indication of such a view - and it seems quite a strong indication, when read in this context.

(3) The idea is in line with Hume's general position, that moral approbation is about motives, and through them about persons.

(4) And it is in line with his general idea of obligation as self-hatred for lack of a motive.

We have now presented what I take to be Hume's theory of obligation, both as far as the obligation to natural and to the important artificial virtues is concerned. But there are a good number of passages in the Treatise dealing with obligation which we have not accounted for, and which seem somewhat puzzling. I am, of course, thinking of Hume's frequent use of 'natural obligation'.

In one of the central passages, which I have already quoted, he is clearly taking natural obligation to be our obligation to perform the natural virtues:

*...where an action is not requir'd by any natural passion, it cannot be requir'd by any natural obligation; since it may be omitted without proving any defect or imperfection in the mind and temper, and consequently without any vice. (T518)*

Here natural obligation is clearly taken to be contrasted with 'artificial obligation' (an expression not used by Hume), in the sense of obligation to perform the artificial virtues. But elsewhere Hume takes natural obligation to be identical with interested motivation: *The natural obligation to justice, viz. interest ... (T498); interest is the first [i.e. original or natural] obligation*

to the performance of promises (T523). And in his later discussions of the relation between the obligation of promises and the obligation of allegiance he talks of *the natural obligations of interest* (T545). But clearly natural obligation here means something different from what it means in the first quoted sense. When we behave justly and perform promises out of self-interest, there is obviously nothing involved about us hating ourselves for the lack of a natural motive and thus a natural virtue. Natural obligation in the sense of interested motivation is closely akin to Hobbes's idea of natural obligation: to have an obligation is to be obliged, i.e. urged by natural (self-interested) passions to do something, without the interference of anything moral. Natural obligation must, therefore, here be taken in opposition, not to artificial obligation, but to moral obligation.

We can not, however, complain about this confusing use of the word 'natural', for Hume has already early in Book III gone through five different senses of the word, namely as opposed to the miraculous, the unusual, the artificial, the civil, and the moral. And he concludes by warning us: *The opposition will always discover the sense, in which it ['natural'] is taken!* (Tn475)

The concept of natural obligation in the sense of interested motivation is also necessary, if we are to understand Hume's ideas that moral obligation varies in proportion with the natural obligation. This idea comes up in various places, but particularly clearly in the *Section Of the laws of nations* in the Treatise. He there points out that men in fact more easily go along with transgressions of the natural laws between states and their sovereigns than between private men (T568). He ascribes this to the fact that whereas justice between states arises out of self-interest on the part of the states, just as is the case with individual men, and whereas this likewise gives rise to a moral obligation, this self-interest

will often not be so strong and, indeed, necessary as between individuals, and consequently the moral obligation must be weaker as well:

*...tho' the intercourse of different states be advantageous, and even sometimes necessary, yet it is not so necessary nor advantageous as that among individuals, without which 'tis utterly impossible for human nature ever to subsist. Since, therefore, the natural obligation to justice, among different states, is not so strong as among individuals, the moral obligation, which arises from it, must partake of its weakness. (T569)*

The interest involved consists of a regard to the utility of certain kinds of actions (and their motives), and it is through sympathy with this utility that our moral evaluations and obligations arise. So when the utility varies, so do the evaluations and the obligations: the moral obligation holds proportion with the usefulness. (EPM206)<sup>7</sup>

Hume states the same idea when he treats of the virtues of chastity and allegiance to governments. But he there also points out that the direct connection between utility and obligation may be off-set by the influence of general rules. When people have become used to a pattern of behaviour in accordance with certain rules, they do not automatically and immediately change that behaviour when the rules prove not to be useful any longer. Thus women still stick to the rules of chastity when they are past the child-bearing age, though the rules then no longer serve their specific purpose (T572-573; E 207-208); and men do not instantly rebel against a government, as soon as it does not quite serve their interests (T551-553). Thus one natural principle, namely the adherence to general rules, overrules another, namely the motivating force of utility, in certain cases. And in both the cases mentioned

he points out that this is as well, for in general the long-term effect of adherence to the general rules is more useful than it would be to follow the ideas of utility at any given moment (T552-553, 572-573; E207-208). In other words, an unintended, but useful result is created by thwarting motives which intended useful results.

Knud Haakonssen  
Monash University

1. References are to the pages of the Treatise in Selby-Bigge's edition.
2. This is very well-known from Professor Árdal's work and needs no further argument in the present context. See Árdal's Passion and Value in Hume's Treatise (Edinburgh, 1966) and his Introduction and Notes to his edition of Treatise, Books II and III (Fontana paperbacks, 1972).
3. On this point see Prof. Árdal's Introduction (cf. previous note). The \* marked word 'principle' is one of Hume's marginal text corrections. The word printed was 'motive'. For these corrections, see R. W. Connon, "Some MS Corrections by Hume in the Third Volume of his Treatise of Human Nature", Long Room, No. 11, Spring-Summer, 1975.
4. See Duncan Forbes's excellent treatment of this in his Hume's Philosophical Politics (Cambridge, 1975), ch.4.
5. See Prof. Árdal's treatment of sympathy in chs. 3 and 6 of his book (see note (2) above).
6. There is at least one other place where Hume hints that actions rather than motives can be the important thing in seeing how obligation arises. See (T479), where he ends his treatment of obligation, saying, *Actions are at first only consider'd as signs of motives: But 'tis usual, in this case, as in all others, to fix our attention on the signs, and neglect, in some measure, the thing signify'd.*
7. References are to the pages of the Enquiries in Selby-Bigge's edition.