



Artificial Virtue, Self-Interest and Acquired Social Concern

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Hume Studies Volume IX, Number 1 (April, 1983) 46-58.

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ARTIFICIAL VIRTUE, SELF-INTEREST,
AND ACQUIRED SOCIAL CONCERN

I

One of Hume's most celebrated contributions to moral philosophy is his distinction between natural and artificial virtue. This is obviously intended to be an important distinction but its significance is less than obvious. Many modern commentators view both as interest based, with the natural virtues related to our immediate interests while the artificial are linked to our enlightened long-term interests.¹ Despite the fact that this standard reading does have some textual support (e.g., T535-537)², it is not without its difficulties. The major problem lies in the account of why artificial virtues are, in fact, virtues. Natural and artificial virtues frequently encourage conflicting actions. For example (T497-498), the repayment of a loan to a "seditious bigot" may be in accord with the artificial virtue attached to justice, but nevertheless may thwart public as well as individual interest and consequently clash with natural virtue. As a result, we are faced with two alternatives: We can either accept the standard interpretation and its attendant incoherencies or we can re-examine Hume's natural/artificial distinction in hopes of arriving at a reading capable of avoiding these complications. What follows is an attempt to exploit the second option.

In essence, I shall urge that a sharper distinction is needed between the artificial and natural virtues. The present deficiency clearly emerges once we realize that the standard account totally overlooks a critical aspect of Hume's doctrine. Not only does Hume provide a speculative history of how societal conventions arose from the state of nature (an essentially diachronic account), but he also offers an explanation of why we now attach moral approbation to actions falling within these conventions (an essentially

synchronic account). It is the latter that enables Hume to explain the connection between moral sentiment and the artificial virtues; yet this aspect is completely neglected on the popular interpretation. These two accounts must be distinguished and clarified in order to understand Hume's intent and position.

II

Hume's distinction between natural and artificial virtue is roughly this: Natural virtue is attributable to those sentiments and passions which, if acted upon, generally tend to yield pleasing results to ourselves or others. On the other hand, we ascribe artificial virtue to actions which constitute a certain practice, the observance of which tends towards the good of mankind. Thus, an action is naturally virtuous if it is motivated by a sentiment which, if regularly acted upon, would have pleasant results. Because of this, naturally virtuous actions usually have pleasing consequences. It is in our own self-interest to promote the natural virtues and the actions they engender. Meanwhile, we attach artificial virtue to actions falling under a practice or convention. In effect, we view the entire practice as well as its particular constituent actions as virtuous.

This distinction seems fairly simple; nonetheless it has two significant consequences. First, in both cases, virtue is attributed to the motives behind rather than the specific actions themselves. For instance, Hume argues that benevolence is a natural virtue (E295-302)³, therefore any action following from this motive will be virtuous. However, the same action fails to be virtuous if it does not stem from the sentiment of benevolence. It is the motive that bestows virtue upon the action. Similarly, an action is artificially virtuous if it arises from an artificially virtuous motive. For example, an action is

artificially virtuous if it springs from the desire to do what is just (an artificially virtuous motive); yet the same action is not virtuous if it is inspired by a non-virtuous motive or mere caprice. Just as with their natural counterparts, artificially virtuous motives are responsible for the actions they induce. But it is here that the similarity ends, for natural virtue is assigned to motives to perform immediately agreeable actions while artificial virtue is connected with motives to act within institutions deemed to be in the interest of society. To return to the earlier examples, actions arising from benevolence will almost always have an immediately agreeable affect, although, as Hume admits (T497-498, 597; E286, 304), there are exceptions. Of course actions performed for the sake of benevolence may fail to have the desired pleasing effect, but this is usually due to the occurrence of some unforeseen event or miscalculation on our part. However, there are times when we correctly assess the situation only to realize that a just action may not be in any individual's or the short-term public interest. In spite of the disagreeable consequences in these instances, the just action is still virtuous. This underscores the fact that actions arising from naturally virtuous motives generally yield agreeable results while this is not true of those based upon artificially virtuous motives. The standard account seizes upon this difference but fails to come to grips with why this is the case. This brings us to the second consequence of my proposed reading.

The difference in the effects of the two types of virtues can be traced to their determinant motive. Natural virtues attach to motives falling under certain kinds while the artificial are associated with motives to act in accordance with certain created institutions. Practices (such as those of justice) are on the whole beneficial, so motives to act within them are (artificially) virtuous. As a result artificial virtue is attributed to those actions and motive.

which define such practices. This is not the case with the natural virtues, for even though they may apply to customs they do not pertain to contrived practices or institutions. Thus, the distinction between natural and artificial virtues relies upon the difference between act and practice. This accounts for the apparent disparity; that is, actions may be artificially virtuous even though we know beforehand that they will not be agreeable to either individuals or society while the same does not hold for naturally virtuous actions. Nonetheless, some conventional practices are considered artificially virtuous since they usually do promote individual and/or public interest. We do not expect each individual action within a convention to have the same effect as the practice as a whole, but we do have such expectations in regard to the motives we deem naturally virtuous. It is this act/practice distinction which forms the foundation of the natural/artificial virtue distinction.

Hume offers an historical account of how these practices (as well as the associated artificial virtues) evolve from pre-societal conditions. In man's "unsocialized" state, there are no rules of justice, property, obligation, or promising; in short, no artificial virtues. Still man finds himself unable to satisfy his need since he has but limited generosity, is selfish, and the goods he desires are scarce. Given that all men share a common nature, seeking to act in their own self-interest, each realizes that additional advantages may be attained if all assent to a system of rules concerning behavior and possessions. Everyone has and expresses such a desire, so certain practices are established in the belief that they will be beneficial to each participant. As a consequence, social conventions arise from an appeal to "confined generosity" and "self-interest".

There is little reason to assume the conditions (either necessary or sufficient) that give rise to a practice

must be essential to its continued existence. The appeal to self-interest which played such a critical role in establishing social conventions need not be enough to guarantee the continuance of these practices. As we have already noted, specific acts of justice may run counter to my individual self-interest. If this were my sole motivation, I would only perform those actions which I feel are in my own particular self-interest. But if this is the case, then I'm not really acting within or motivated by the practice of justice; I'm only concerned with my own self-interest. To have and be motivated by an institution is something more than this. Appeals to self-interest simply are not enough to assure the perpetuation of such practices. This is a sharp divergence from the standard reading, for many commentators cast our long-term (as opposed to immediate) self-interest as the motivation for acting within social conventions.⁴ Hume, however, denies such a continuing natural motive since it would make institutions *conform themselves* to our partiality (T488-489). At this point, the popular interpretation fails to recognize the synchronic element of Hume's ethical theory, the aspect so crucial to the matter at hand.

Social conventions are perpetuated by our ascription of moral sentiment which, in turn, is introduced through the artificial virtues. Although the inauguration of institutions cannot "create" new sentiments (T479, 500, 517), conventions can enliven and enhance those we do possess. This can happen in two ways. First, they may allow us to employ *more artful and more refin'd way(s) of satisfying* our self-interest by enabling us to achieve *greater degrees of happiness and perfection* (T526 and E201, respectively). We have desires for *consciousness of integrity, a satisfactory review of our own conduct* (E283) and for *reputation* (T501) that can be tied to societal institutions. Despite the fact that these are natural sentiments, they do not motivate us until the advent of specific

institutions. For instance, I can't desire the reputation of a just man until the notion of "justice" derives some meaning within an appropriate convention (T479-480). In this way then, social institutions may exploit our own self-interest. It's important to note that contrary to the standard account, this is not enlightened, long-term, self-interest. Instead, it is altered by the new desires and changing interdependencies resulting from societal growth.

The good of each, qua member of society, is constantly growing more complex and difficult to discern. In fact, a sense of public interest begins to evolve once social conventions have been established. Appeals to this fledgling motivation serve as the second means of sustaining collective institutions. Indeed, it is here that moral approbation enters in. Although man does not have a natural sense of public interest sufficient to establish social practices (T481), once these conventions take hold, it emerges as a motivation for their continuance (T480). The desire to promote the public interest can become so strong, it may at times be the sole source of moral approbation (T578). Concern for the public good is not identical to that of sympathy (T481); nevertheless, the latter defines and legitimizes the former since *we have no such extensive concern for society but from sympathy which produces our sentiment of morals in all the artificial virtues* (T579 and 577-578, respectively). Sympathy is a natural, albeit somewhat weak, virtue. In order for it to have any bearing on social institutions, it must be nurtured and strengthened. In fact, all the institutional rules and values must be actively encouraged in order to instill the requisite motivations to act accordingly. This would not be the case if self-interest or other powerful natural sentiments were the sustaining basis of social conventions and the associated artificial virtues.

Social institutions originate from commonly held

individual self-interest. Despite the fact that self-interest provides the motivation for their initial acceptance, it is not enough to assure their continuance. Instead their adoption requires that we accept practices wherein any given action may have undesirable consequences for many, if not all, involved. This is why educators and politicians must help us to extend the *natural sentiments beyond their original bounds* (T500); in other words, to reinforce and broaden a pre-existing pattern of judgment. When we learn to talk of "honor", "integrity", "reputation", etc., we have, in effect, learned to classify actions in virtue of their value to society. This social value serves as a motivation to perpetuate social practices. Self-interest can point the way towards collective conventions, but it cannot provide the social value for their continuance or the ascription of artificial virtue.

III

Hume's account of natural virtues is relatively clear:

Every quality of the mind is denominated virtuous, which gives pleasure by the mere survey; as every quality, which produces pain, is call'd vicious. (T591)

While the standard account accurately depicts this aspect of Hume's theory, I argued in the previous section that it misconstrues his intent in regard to the role of and motivation for the artificial virtues. Its proponents would have us believe that artificial virtue is attached to those particular actions that tend to be in our own long-term, individual self-interest. I submit this muddles Hume's account by totally ignoring the weight he places on man's ability to develop a sense of societal worth and public interest. In order to specifically illustrate this point, let's consider Hume's portrayal of the convention of justice.

The first thing to note is that justice is not a natural virtue for it *wou'd never have been dream'd of among rude and savage men* (T488).⁵ Instead, it is a *voluntary convention...of men* (T533).⁶ Hume characterizes such a convention as

...a sense of common interest; which sense each man feels in his own breast, which he remarks in his fellows, and which carries him, in concurrence with others, into a general plan or system of actions, which tends to public utility ... (E306)⁷

It's important to realize that the institution of justice is not a product of man's desire to further *public utility* since this motivation arises only after the practice has been established (T480, 481, 495-496). On the contrary, justice evolves because men, in their natural state, suffer inconveniences (T485, 495, 496; E183-184). Individually, each can see that society and its constituent conventions (including justice) can help to alleviate these problems (T490, 533, 620; E215, 306). Even though the minds and sentiments of men are similar (T575-576), each realizes that a non-natural (T519) *common point of view* is needed due to the fact that *every particular person's pleasure and interest* [is] *different* (T591).⁸ It is this common point of view that is reflected in the conventions of society. Self-interest leads to the acceptance of social conventions: each individual sees that only by agreeing to act within the structure of society can he hope to escape troublesome inconveniences. Nonetheless, following this acceptance, he may often find his own particular self-interest countermanded by the dictates of justice (T497-498; E285-286). Because of this, something more than self-interest must serve to perpetuate justice. This is where the diachronic portrayal of the origins of the convention ends and the synchronic account of its continuance begins.

Although the practice of justice is not naturally virtuous, it is artificially virtuous, so consequently it must still have some effect on our passions (T457, 479, 518,

532). Insofar as sentiments can be extended but not created (T500,517), those leading to justice (as well as all the other artificial virtues) must be previously possessed. Indeed, in his pre-societal state, man already has the requisite sentiments such as the desire for reputation, peace of mind, and integrity (T501; E283). At this stage however, they are contentless since they presuppose an institution for their satisfaction. The creation of collective conventions awakens and taps these sentiments for they may be tied to such practices through instruction (T500,533-534). This education spurs a deepening concern for the public utility which extends beyond each individual's self-interest (T579). Ultimately, it may become the "sole" motive behind just action (T578; E231). This is understandable inasmuch as the general rules that define the institution of justice *carry our maxims beyond those reasons, which first induc'd us to establish them* (T551).⁹ As a result, adherence to social conventions may become unreflectively automatic (T499; E203) if not out of concern for the public interest.

The motivation leading to the acceptance of the practice of justice is not identical to the source of its moral virtue. Hume has this distinction in mind when he declares:

The natural obligation to justice, viz. interest, has been fully explain'd; but as to the moral obligation or the sentiment of right and wrong, 'twill first be requisite to examine the natural virtues, before we can give a full and satisfactory account of it. (T498, Hume's emphasis)

The promised account of natural virtue (T574 ff.) centers on sympathy which he defines as *the conversion of an idea into an impression by the force of imagination* (T427). Only through sympathy can events affecting others affect us. It strengthens the motivational force of concern for the public utility and moreover, is the source of moral approbation for justice as well as all the other artificial

virtues. In Hume's words:

Justice is certainly approv'd of for no other reason, than because it has a tendency to the public good: And the public good is indifferent to us, except so far as sympathy interests us in it. We may presume the like with regard to all the other virtues, which have a like tendency to the public good. They must derive all their merit from our sympathy with those, who reap any advantage from them ... (T618)10

Assuredly, sympathy, not self-interest, is the source of the moral approbation we attribute to justice:

Thus 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, Hume's emphasis)

This sympathy with the public interest is what we learn when we are taught to classify actions according to their social worth rather than simply in accordance with their value to us. Training of this nature is essential to insure the continuation of the practice of justice. We must be educated in the "finer" things of life (E203-204) in order to cultivate justice's motivational force and moral approbation. This view is much more than a mere appeal to enlightened self-interest; it is an introduction of social value, classification, and judgment. Furthermore, this approach is not restricted to the convention of justice but applies to the other artificial virtues as well (T523, 577-580). Thus, self-interest leads to the acceptance of collective institutions while their attributed social value stemming from public interest and sympathy serves as their sustaining basis.

Once again the act/practice distinction re-emerges. The natural virtues are associated with particular actions that tend to advance our own self-interest while the artificial ones arise from the observance of rules and conventions (T533-534, 543). Indeed, Hume often speaks of the practice of justice as "advantageous" although he concedes

that particular just actions may fail to be so (T579-580; E304). As a result, not only is the distinction between natural and artificial virtue one of individual and public interest, it is also one of act and practice.

IV

Upon recognizing the import of the synchronic aspect of Hume's theory, it's easy to see how he is able to avoid the major difficulty marring the standard account. As I observed in Section I, Hume's ethical theory is generally taken to rest solely upon self-interest. On such a reading however, certain actions could be in accord with the artificial virtues, yet still be immoral if they are contrary to the individual's or society's interest. This problem will persist as long as Hume is (incorrectly) assumed to tie morality strictly to interests in particular actions. I have urged that this is not the case, for in extending moral approbation to social concerns and practices Hume avoids this pitfall. Moreover, as indicated by the textual evidence cited in Sections II and III, this interpretation is well documented.

It's interesting to note that although sympathy has a major influence on artificial virtue in the Treatise, its role is conspicuously diminished in the Enquiry. In contrast to the former, the latter stresses the importance of the "common point of view" (e.g., E229, 272-273). There are a variety of explanations for this apparent shift in emphasis, yet in the final analysis, it is simply not that significant, for as I have pointed out sympathy and public interest both serve to sustain social conventions. It may be interesting to speculate on the motives behind this alteration; nonetheless, it has little, if any, effect on this particular aspect of Hume's ethical theory.

Hume argues that morality surpasses enlightened self-interest. Although the crude self-interest that

motivates pre-societal man may be enough to inspire the natural virtues, the artificial virtues require a much more "social" and acquired sense of concern. These notions are strengthened through instruction and indeed should occasionally curb self-interest. The concerns of the socially and morally trained man far exceed his pre-societal counterpart's sole, self-interested motivation (E282-284). Contrary to the standard reading, Hume expresses a dynamic and complex view of man; one in which man's desires and motivations are enhanced and altered as the society he creates changes and grows. Hume correctly perceived that in a large society, self-interest simply will not do as a foundation for man's long-range behavior. He recognized, if you will, that social man is not merely "natural man plus rules for satisfying long-term interests." Social man may suffer pleasures and pains that are not available in his more natural state. Hume's astute realization of this fact led to his often overlooked insight that acquired social concerns sustain collective conventions and artificial virtues.

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1. Various versions of this interpretation are held by a number of commentators. See for example, Barry Stroud, Hume (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977). Chapter IX; J.L. Mackie, Hume's Moral Theory, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), Chapter VI, Sections 1 - 3; Pall S. Ardal Passion and Value in Hume's Treatise (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966), Chapter VIII; and Duncan Forbes, Hume's Philosophical Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), Chapter II.
2. All references to A Treatise of Human Nature will appear in the text in the form [T, page number]. The edition cited is edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978).

58.

3. All references to An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals will appear in the text in the form, [E, page number]. The edition cited is Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978).
4. See for example, Ardal, p. 181, 187; Mackie, pp. 91-93; Stroud, pp.213-214; Forbes, p. 79. Cf. T491-492,497.
5. Cf., T533.
6. Cf., T490,498; E306.
7. Cf., T498.
8. Cf., E228,272-273.
9. Cf., E207.
10. Cf., T499,577-580.