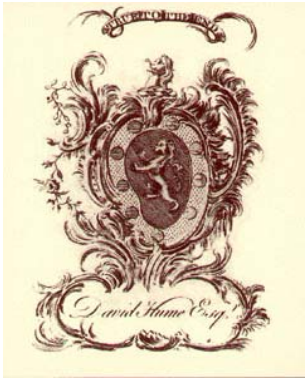

John Passmore and Hume's Moral Philosophy
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JOHN PASSMORE AND HUME'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY[1]

A quarter century ago, the message undergraduates absorbed about David Hume was as an extremely favourable one. He was the great precursor of logical empiricism and so his philosophy, at least in its main lines, must be nearer the mark than that of any other of the great names. Hume had discovered the right view of causation. He had exposed and banished school metaphysics. He had rightly drawn attention to the problem of induction. He had discovered the is-ought gap and revealed the practical impotence of reason in the face of the passions. But for his weight problem, he could have walked on water.

Those were the circumstances in which I first read John Passmore's book on Hume. Because he was plainly not, like many of Hume's critics, an apologist for Thomism or any of Hegel's offspring, his work could not be dismissed on the grounds of parti pris. It was a shock, therefore, to find him, in Hume's Intentions[2], presenting an image of Hume a considerable distance this side of idolatry. Passmore's critical and, for its time, boldly unfashionable appraisal is to be admired, taken to heart, and extended. Hume's Intentions concentrates on Hume's philosophy of the understanding. It takes up strands of that philosophy and points to their inherent implausibility and mutual incompatibility. Yet these problems also vitiate other parts of Hume's position. In this paper I attempt to introduce the Passmorian method of reasoning into what are nowadays the moral subjects.

Let me remind you of the structure of Passmore's book: it does not mount a consecutive argument so much as take up, tease out, and display one or other leading element in the Humean philosophy. Thus we have chapters on Hume as an enthusiast for the

moral (that is, human, or social) sciences, as a critic of traditional Aristotelian logic, as a developer of more suitable methods for scientific advance, as a positivist, a phenomenalist, an associationist theoretician in psychology, and a sceptic. We learn as we read that in these respects Hume is not consistent. Principles which he espouses, principally negative and sceptical principles, lead to conclusions too extreme to suit his major purposes. Accordingly, they must not be pressed to their proper conclusions. Hume's philosophy of the study must be abandoned rather than actually taken seriously.

Thus, for example: in methodology, Hume insists that reason cannot yield results in the contingent and fallible natural and human sciences. This should lead him to the view that any scientific hypothesis which goes beyond immediate experience is, so far as reason goes, as good, or as bad, as any other. But he recoils from this, distinguishing sensible men from the foolish and superstitious on the basis of the regularity and consistency of the experiences on which the wise rely. Yet as Passmore points out, on Hume's principles, the preference for regularity and consistency cannot be more than a prejudice. Prejudices do not admit of any genuinely rational defence. There is real substance to the superiority claimed for the wise.

Again, consider Hume's positivism. He offers a beguilingly short way with nonsense, especially learned and theological nonsense. School metaphysics and superstition (i.e. Christianity) are to be banished by the use of the impressions and ideas test: When you come upon a word whose meaning you would discover, ask if it refers to an impression or an idea. If to an impression, well and good, its meaning is to be found in present experience. If to an idea, ask from which impression (or impressions) the idea did (or could)

derive. If you cannot find any suitable impressions, the idea is chimerical, and is to be excised from thought as a pathological intruder.

This procedure produces most satisfactorily negative results when it comes to the Trinity and the sacraments, or essence, inherence, substantial form, and such metaphysical extravagances.

Unhappily the very same procedure, the impressions and ideas test, also wrecks the foundations of Hume's own thought. As Passmore makes sure we remember, the test robs Hume of the resources with which to account for substance and external existence. Yet he admits these to be central elements in our conception of reality. Notoriously, Hume also lacks the wherewithal on which to base our notion of personal identity. If he were consistent, he would reject some of his own affirmations along with those of which he is so dismissive.

In the third place Hume's official theory holds to what Locke dubbed 'The Way of Ideas'; this claims that we are directly aware only of impressions or of ideas. He out-Lockes Locke in holding that the difference between an impression and an idea is an entirely internal question, being a matter of vivacity alone. In consistency, this should lead to a thoroughgoing phenomenalism, in which the vulgar distinction between reality and imagination in experience emerges as a difference of degree only, not of kind or causal origin. Further, Hume's version of the Way of Ideas provides no basis for drawing a distinction between the vivid (and so 'real') impressions of sensible folk like Hume, and those equally vivid (and so equally 'real') impressions of madmen, fanatics, and metaphysicians of all kinds. Further yet, the evidential value, with respect to the history of the world, of a faded memory on the one

hand, and a vivacious bit of imaginative construction on the other, should be equal. Not only is this last consequence a reductio ad absurdum, it was never part of Hume's actual practice in framing his own beliefs, or coming to a judgment over the belief of others.

To summarize, these three elements in Hume's official position (the impotence of reason in the synthetic sphere, the positivism, and the phenomenalist doctrine of impressions and ideas) stand in the way of any seriously critical philosophy. For they all indicate an equality, a parity of esteem, among all notions, however wild. Not surprisingly, the official theory is modified, exceptions are admitted and when necessary the official principles are just quietly forgotten. Hume is too sensible to be the prisoner of his own principal doctrines.

One example of this, of particular interest for a consideration of Hume's moral theory, concerns other minds. The positivism and phenomenalism in Hume's account of the understanding should conspire to yield the conclusion that we can have no notion of, and certainly no knowledge of, minds other than our own. For another's mind can never be an impression in ours. Yet the entire fabric of Hume's moral and political philosophy rests on the assumption not only that there are many other persons, but that they are all fundamentally alike in their sentiments and that we can know what these sentiments are.

Despite such unpromising chief principles, Passmore credits Hume with two signal and permanent achievements -- to have demonstrated the contingency and fallibility of natural knowledge, and to have exhibited the loose and separate nature of the different elements in reality, that is, the contingency of the way of working of the natural order.

In identifying these as Hume's contributions, Passmore is not at odds with David Stove's estimate, according to which Hume is the *master of deflation*, showing that the strength of arguments is commonly less than it is imagined to be and that, in particular, many an argument fondly thought to be apodeictic is in truth no such thing.[3] Hume's contributions to the deflation of argument and conclusion are particularly notable in the philosophy of God, of causation, and of morals.

In causality and induction, in morality, in theology, the message is the same: we cannot attain knowledge, for there are no premises available to us from which, by compelling argument, substantial yet necessary conclusions can be reached. So we must abandon knowledge in favour of mere probability.

So far well enough. Hume's downfall, as Passmore expounds him, lies in the inability of his philosophy to yield any but an irrationalist theory of thinking in terms of probabilities. Only prejudices, proclivities, and tendencies of our minds determine us on the one hand to a belief in a material and social world explorable by the Newtonian methods of science, and on the other to a rejection of the dreamlands of religion and Aristotelian natural philosophy. Any ideas that the *prejudices and proclivities* which produce such a preference for the Enlightened opinions are superior to all alternatives is an inconsistent addition to the system.

Now in my judgment a parallel verdict can be brought in with respect to Hume's moral philosophy. That ethics is not to be assimilated to mathematics, that is, that pure reason is not sufficient to determine the content and limits of the right and the good, is a Humean lesson of the highest value. Substantial moral theses are not analytic truths. In this respect ethics and natural philosophy keep

company, jointly instructed by Hume to the same effect. Furthermore, substantial moral theses are not conclusions of deductively valid arguments with purely factual premisses. This is a further lesson which Hume has permanently dramatized for us.

However, Hume's moral philosophy rests the validity of moral maxims on no sturdier foundation than the general sentiments of mankind. Hume makes moral judgment rest on the pleasure or pain which people feel on the contemplation of any action. This reliance on pleasure or pain corresponds in moral epistemology to the prejudices and tendencies of the mind on which we rely in questions of natural belief. And equally, it fails to establish any real superiority of one set of moral opinions over any other. Far from a moral sceptic in real life, Hume's principles would require moral scepticism of him were he to follow those principles through. As with natural knowledge, Hume's moral philosophy erects no fence against the fanatics, bigots, villains, and monkish ascetics it was his purpose to discredit.

The remainder of this paper develops the case that Hume's moral philosophy recapitulates the sceptical overkill of his philosophy of nature. Passmore's critique of Hume's philosophy of the understanding allows us, I believe, to identify the crucial doctrines which led Hume astray. My thesis is that these same errors produce the same effect in the ethics.

Consider, first the Way of Ideas, the doctrine with perhaps the widest consensus in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century philosophy. If we cannot be directly aware of any reality but a state of, perhaps a part of, our own minds, the chances for the possibility of knowledge of the independently real at once become desperate indeed. The Way of Ideas

generates an almost unstoppable momentum in thought towards the notion that the real subject matter of every genuine science must in fact be states of mind. We are familiar with the effects of this: operationalism and instrumentalism in theories of the material world, of which Hume was an early exponent, and idealist theories of the social world, where Hume should have carried the ideas, but did not. That physics and psychology have a common subject matter is a notion fantastic enough to be relatively innocuous. Passmore shows us Hume nodding in that direction in his plan for the centrality of the human studies in our map of knowledge. There is nonetheless very little danger that Newton or his successors will adopt some introspective or interview method for the prosecution of their studies. There is little danger, that is, that a phenomenalistic metaphysic of matter will have a seriously distorting effect on the methodology of the physical sciences.

In the moral realm, however, the situation is much more dangerous. Moral questions are indeed questions about sentient beings in particular, and furthermore, they are questions into which issues of preference, and pleasure, and pain, and approval, often enter quite essentially. The inevitably large role states of mind play in the subject matter of ethics makes it especially important to distinguish, and to keep distinguished, the questions: What is in truth good for beings of type T in circumstances C? and, How do we come to form opinions as to what is good for Ts in C? For this latter question is indeed psychological. Its subject matter is properly what Hume would call impressions and ideas.

The error of supposing that we cannot investigate anything <u>but</u> impressions and ideas has a fatal tendency to conflate our two questions. Such a

conflation is not without precedent. When Hume has convinced himself that there cannot be any actual necessary connection between cause and effect, he moves, not to the issue -- What does in truth distinguish a cause from a mere accompaniment? -- but to the psychological question -- Under what circumstances do we find ourselves forming, and holding to, the myth of necessary connection? In parallel fashion, when Hume has established to his own satisfaction that moral distinctions are not revealed by reason, he proceeds to investigate not the differences between good and bad characters or right and wrong actions, but what elements in human psychology determine us to judge that certain characters are good and certain actions are base. Not the situations of people but our experiences on coming to learn of the situations of people become the centre of attention. Ethics comes to concern itself with those opinions which arise out of pleasure or displeasure caused by sympathetic understanding of how one person is affected by the actions of another.

This fatal mis-step, which converts a moral theory into a treatise in moral psychology, rests in part on the proposition that the subject matter of all the sciences must be mental experiences.

It rests in part also on the second crucial error, which we could dub 'pessimistic rationalism.' Rationalism demands of what shall count as knowledge that it be necessary and if possible certain, and it demands of reasoning that it be conclusive. As Hume taught us, only deductive reasoning is fully conclusive. Pessimistic rationalism adds that knowledge deserving the name is not to be had outside of mathematics, while perception may yield some immediate though contingent certainties, which do not lead to any further knowledge since conclusive

reasoning is not ampliative. So what Hume calls probability, all that field of belief which embraces ordinary contingent propositions, and inductive, hypothetical, or historical inference, lies beyond the domain of reason. Since the results and techniques of natural science are not endorsed by reason, they cannot be shown to be rationally superior to, that is, more reasonable than, any alternative methods and results concerning matters of fact. Old wives' tales are on a par with Boyle's Law.

This untoward outcome we see in Hume's scepticism about induction. We find it also in his conversion of both the theory of inductive reasoning and the theory of how to discover causes into essays on the habits and proclivities of the mind.

In the moral case, Hume does not long dwell on the idea that there might be a species of reasoning which is peculiar to the moral realm. Reason will not produce the goods. From this it does not follow, as Hume assumes, that the only alternative is a "moral sense" which gives us impressions of pleasure or uneasiness under encounter with motives and actions.

In the realm of natural knowledge, the demonstration of the inadequacy of rationalism is not the same thing at all as the establishment of the irrationalist doctrine that "Thus all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation. 'Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy" (i.e. knowledge in general).[4] The falsehood of rationalism is in fact compatible with all of the following:

Induction is reasonable because its conclusions are more likely to be correct than those of other methods. Causal reasoning is reasonable because it avails itself of knowledge of the world's inner connexions. Hypothetical reasoning is reasonable

because it is exposed to successive refinements and improvements. Moral reasoning is reasonable because it is one kind of practical reasoning, and practical reasoning is reasonable because by its means we are more likely to find what is best to do.

Since these are all compatible with the denial of rationalism, they are propositions which Hume has not refuted, and which are therefore live alternatives to his retreat into a mere description of human thinking processes.

That alternatives to the moral sense theory of moral distinctions are not only alive but kicking is to be seen in Hume's troubles with the Euthyphro problem, to which I will return in a moment.

The third critical error, which betrayed Hume into the disastrous dichotomy of reason or taste, is the theory of association. Question: what determines the mind, in proceeding from one thought to the next? Answer: the mind moves from one thought to another related to the first by resemblance, contiguity, and/or cause and effect. That is, our minds proceed from one item to others which we have found to resemble the first, or occur close by the first, or be constantly conjoined with the first.

As Passmore points out, this theory, the centrepiece of Hume's Newtonian ambitions, is woefully inadequate, and requires supplementation, exceptions, and ad hoc digressions at every turn. What is of importance here is that where it does in fact apply, the mental processes are not reasonable. That is, a mind moving from idea to idea according to the principles of association would not be a mind proceeding in a way which could be shown to have a fair chance of conserving truth. A mind moving by association could not even be shown to have a better chance of conserving truth than one using alternative

modes of procedure. To operate by association is indeed to leave the realm of reason for that of taste. In the realm of taste what is selected is whatever in fact appeals to one, in abstraction from its inherent merits, if any.

Experience is fragmentary, excessively contingent, and essentially superficial. What strikes us as resemblance must be a relationship among elements which we chance to have experienced, and may or may not signal a significant relationship in reality. What we have come across by way of joint occurrence relates items which may in a wider context correlate not with one another but with further elements not given to experience at all. This last possibility is peculiarly pressing when we consider the causal tie. The idea that cause and effect must connect experiencable elements is a disastrous recipe for advance towards insight.

So the Way of Ideas, pessimistic rationalism, and associationism conspire to yield an excessive scepticism in the theory of natural knowledge; in the moral realm, they issue in the moral sense theory, which is also a kind of scepticism.

> 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. (T 517)

This characteristic statement of Hume's position encapsulates both the scepticism and the Euthyphro problem. If an action pleases, we say it is virtuous. If we say so whether or not it really is virtuous, the theory is a case of scepticism. If an action is virtuous because and insofar as we say so, the theory, so far from being sceptical, is a sort of

moral infallibilism. For whether we are pleased or not is a matter over which Hume supposes we cannot make a mistake. This interpretation appears in:

> The distinction of moral good and evil is founded on the pleasure or pain, which results from the view of any sentiment, or character; and as that pleasure or pain cannot be unknown to the person who feels it, it follows, that there is just so much vice or virtue in any character, as everyone places in it, and that 'tis impossible in this particular we can ever be mistaken. (T 546-547)

Although this seems to yield an abundance of infallible moral knowledge, the problem remains of quite what it is that we know. For everyone is now his own oracle on morals; but that amounts to a scepticism over any objective question. And it only requires enough people to become so depraved as to delight in the misfortunes of others, for vice to be turned into virtue, and vice versa. Hume maintains an equivocal stance with a footnote to the passage just quoted:

> This proposition [just so much vice or virtue, in any character, as everyone places in it] must hold strictly true, with regard to every quality, that is determin'd merely by sentiment. In what sense we can talk either of a right or wrong taste in morals, ... shall be consider'd afterwards. In the meantime, it may be observ'd, that there is such an uniformity in the general sentiments of mankind, as to render such questions of but small importance. (T 547, my brackets)

For cool eighteenth century European complacency, this takes some beating -- here is a decent chap's philosophy for decent chaps.

Montaigne gets nearer the mark when he says:

> Whom trust you in seeing what is commendable? God keep me from being an honest man, according to the description I dayly see made of honour,

> each one by himself. What erst were vices are now grown fashions.[5]

To return to Hume's difficulties with the Euthyphro problem. They emerge as a recurrent ambiguity. The passage speaks of "the distinction of moral good and evil," and that expression equivocates between the difference between moral good and evil on the one hand, and our distinguishing between moral good and evil. That we form and pass moral judgments on the basis of sentiment, pleasure, and pain is rather plausible. But this plausible proposition is of course entirely consistent with the thesis that what makes for good and evil in the real world has nothing to do with sentiment, pleasure or pain in the judge.

Does the good please us on account of its goodness, or is it good on account of the pleasure its contemplation affords? Hume needs the latter for his theory to be a moral sense theory of morals, and not merely a moral sense theory of how we come to form moral opinions, which is a much less interesting and important topic. And yet we find: "When any quality, or character, has a tendency to the good of mankind, we are pleas'd with it, and approve of it..." (T 580). This statement supposes an objective value determining our pleasure, and reduces the role of moral sense to the formation of moral opinion.

Hume's oscillation on the Euthyphro dilemma is the symptom of conflict between the moral sense theory and his actual moral convictions. The moral sense theory is too corrosive, and issues in too individualistic a theory of what gives a man a right to an opinion about conduct. The theory awards that right to anyone with sympathetic responses to the situations of others. The theory can make no discriminations between one response and another. The upshot is that any unfeigned response of pleasure or pain at another's

situation is as valid as any other. This quite cuts away any basis on which Hume could discredit the evaluations of the theologically fanatical, whose pain over Sabbath-breaking, for example, is real and intense. It destroys any hope of discrediting the ascetic, whose enjoyment at the prospect of enjoyment has been demolished. It forestalls any criticism of the fierce passions of the pugnacious, rapacious, and piratical enemies of the King's peace.

The principles of Hume's normal philosophy, which was designed to bring rationalistic dogmatism to an end, overshoot the mark. They offer equal endorsement to all beliefs, including rationalistic dogmatism. The principles thus reinstate the erroneous beliefs they were designed to remove. The parallel with the situation in natural philosophy holds.

In the Conclusion of this book we find Hume still failing to resolve the Euthyphro dilemma, still trying to have it both ways:

> ...Sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions (that word again).... Justice is certainly approv'd of for no other reason, than because it has a tendency to the public good.... 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: As the virtues, which have a tendency to the good of the person possess'd of them, derive their merit from our sympathy with him. (T 618, my parenthesis).

Here, in the space of one paragraph, we have an ambiguous version, a realist version, and a subjectivist version of the relationship between sympathy (the relevant sentiment) and good, virtue, or moral status. I doubt whether any untangling of this mess would give us a thesis which it could be fair to describe as the

real Humean one. Passmore's example suggests that the wisest course to follow, as a commentator on Hume, is to exhibit the inconsistencies and leave them lying side by side.

In Hume's philosophy of the understanding there is a continual, and lamentable, pressure to replace issues in the vindication of right method with issues in the de facto operation of the human mind; and in parallel, Book III of the Treatise offers us, in place of an enquiry into the foundations of morals, an investigation of how we come to have moral opinions.

With respect to the understanding, Passmore shows how Hume can maintain the superiority of the methods and opinions he favours only by a desperate appeal to the solid "good sense" of the "decent majority." And in parallel, Hume's distinction between a right and a wrong taste in morals, his theory of moral error, rests on the de facto sympathetic sensibility of a "decent majority."

In both cases, Hume is reduced to these inadequate expedients by his attachment to three central, and omnivorously subversive principles: The Way of Ideas, pessimistic rationalism, and the doctrine of association.

So what is Hume's real achievement? To have shown, despite himself, that these principles are false.

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1. This paper was originally delivered at a conference devoted to John Passmore's contribution to philosophy, Canberra, 1982.

2. First edition, Cambridge U.P. 1952. Third edition, Duckworth, 1980.

3. See, for example, D.C. Stove, "The Nature of Hume's Skepticism" in McGill Hume Studies, ed. Norton, Capaldi & Robison (Austin Hill Press, 1979), pp. 203-226.

4. A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. Selby-Bigge. 2nd ed., Oxford, Clarendon Press 1978. (Hereafter, 'T') p. 103.

5. Essays Bk. III, Ch. 2.