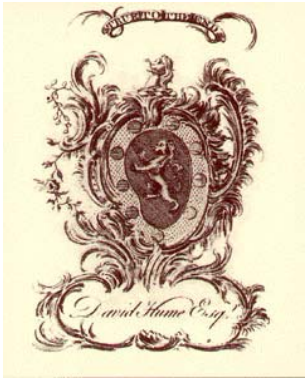

Kemp Smith, Hume and the Parallelism Between Reason and Morality
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KEMP SMITH, HUME AND THE PARALLELISM BETWEEN REASON AND MORALITY

In a letter to a physician written in 1734 Hume expressed a dissatisfaction with the current state of philosophy and criticism, a dissatisfaction which he said had led him to strike out on his own and "seek out some new Medium, by which Truth might be establisht." He then went on to claim success: "After much Study, & Reflection on this, at last, when I was about 18 Years of Age, there seem'd to be open'd up to me a new Scene of Thought, which transported me beyond Measure, & made me, with an Ardor natural to young men, throw up every other Pleasure or Business to apply entirely to it..."[1] The wording suggests that the new Scene of Thought was a clear revelation, but nowhere does Hume tell us what the revelation was. (A clue, perhaps, is to be found in the "Abstract," where Hume says that if anything entitles him to the name of an inventor, "it is the use he makes of the principle of the association of ideas.")[2] Kemp Smith is convinced, however, that he knows what the new Scene of Thought was. According to Kemp Smith, Hume had already discovered that morality rests on feeling alone and depends in no way on insight or evidence, and the new discovery was simply the sudden realization that belief is equally independent of these considerations. I will argue in this paper that the great difficulty in this interpretation is that in those sections of the Treatise and the second Enquiry in which Hume expounds what could be called his moral epistemology he is concerned with pointing out what he considers to be important differences between reason and taste and between understanding and morality. I am not, however, questioning the validity of Kemp Smith's naturalistic interpretation, if it is broadly construed.

A curiosity of Kemp Smith's exposition is his citing of passages from Hume, which at first glance anyway seem to weaken, rather than strengthen, his case for the parallelism of moral and factual judgments. I will give two examples, the first being a quotation from the Green and Grose edition of the Enquiry.

> That Faculty, by which we discern Truth and Falsehood, and that by which we perceive Vice and Virtue had long been confounded with each other, and all Morality was suppos'd to be built on eternal and immutable Relations, which, to every intelligent Mind, were equally invariable as any Proposition concerning Quantity or Number. But a late Philosopher [Mr. Hutcheson, added as a note] has taught us, by the most convincing Arguments, that Morality is nothing in the abstract Nature of Things, but is entirely relative to the Sentiment or mental Taste of each particular [i.e. species] of Being; in the same Manner as the distinctions of sweet and bitter, hot and cold, arise from the particular feeling of each Sense or Organ. Moral Perceptions, therefore, ought not to be class'd with the Operations of the Understanding, but with the Tastes or Sentiments.[3]

On the next page of this book Kemp Smith refers to this passage as part of the evidence for his claim that "the view here taken of our moral judgments of approval and disapproval can be extended to our beliefs regarding matters of fact and existence, and that 'logic', morals and 'criticism' may thus be brought within the scope of the same general principles."[4] The reference to "external and immutable Relations" may have led Kemp Smith to believe that Hume's thesis in this paragraph is the contrast between demonstrative and other kinds of judgment, but the last sentence is a decisive refutation of that interpretation. Hume frequently uses the term "understanding" to refer to causal reasoning, though in this sentence he seems to be using the term in

the more inclusive sense that would include demonstration and relations of ideas as well. But I know of no instances in which "understanding" is restricted to what Hume calls science, i.e., demonstration.

Kemp Smith also quotes from the last section of Appendix I to the second Enquiry. This passage, appearing in the Selby-Bigge edition, is likely to be more familiar than the other one. Here reason, rather than understanding, is contrasted with taste, but it can be seen that this is the same contrast as before. In order not to do violence to Kemp Smith's intention, this quotation, like the one before, has been lifted from his book without alteration.

> The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood: the latter gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. The one discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without alteration or diminution.... From circumstances and relations, known or supposed, [it] leads us to the discovery of the concealed and unknown: [the other], after all circumstances and relations are laid before us ... makes us feel from the whole a new sentiment of blame or approbation.[5]

Evidently, Kemp Smith did feel some uneasiness with this passage because he goes on to say that Hume's explanation of the difference between knowledge and belief reveals that the parallelism between his theory of knowledge and his theory of morals is "much more extensive and complete" than the Enquiry passage would suggest.[6] Unfortunately for Kemp Smith's interpretation, the paragraph from which the selection above is taken states the principal conclusion of Hume's moral epistemology in the Enquiry. And, showing the durability of Hume's thought, the same conclusion had been reached earlier in the Treatise.

Most of what Hume has to say in the Treatise about how we tell the difference between vice and virtue

is to be found in Book III, Part I. Section I, entitled "Moral Distinctions not deriv'd from reason," is the section that has as its last paragraph the famous "is and ought" passage. The paragraph has been variously construed, some writers holding that Hume is merely saying that moral conclusions cannot be deduced from non-moral premises, others holding that special care must be taken in choosing the right premises. But if the entire section is looked at, rather than the single paragraph, it is clear that Hume is saying that moral judgments are not inferences of any sort. And the following passage would seem to be almost conclusive.

> Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be deriv'd from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already prov'd, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.[7]

Of course, Hume is notoriously ambiguous in his use of the term "reason," but there is strong evidence that he is not in this section using "reason" in the meaning of demonstration. The only thing favoring that interpretation is that Hume begins the section by attacking those moral philosophers who had believed that morality could be demonstrated, but the architecture of the section as a whole shows that he has a broader intention. Near the beginning of the section he defines what he is going to mean by "reason." "Reason," he says there, "is the discovery of truth or falshood. Truth or falshood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the <u>real</u> relations of ideas, or to <u>real</u> existence and matter of fact." (T 458) (Apparently, deductive and inductive inferences are the only kinds of inference that Hume recognizes.)[8] He then spends several pages in showing

that morality does not consist in any relations that are the objects of science. Finally, he concludes the argument with what he calls the "second part of our argument," which is to show that morality does not consist in any matter of fact. The second part of his argument consists only of a thought experiment. We are asked to examine a case of willful murder.

> Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. (T 468-69)

According to Hume, morality cannot be a matter of demonstration or induction because so-called moral judgments are not really judgments at all. This is implied in Section I, where he defines "reason" as the discovery of truth or falsehood and then later asserts that morality is not an object of reason. In Section II he is more explicit. He begins the section by arguing that "our decisions concerning moral rectitude and depravity" are impressions. The significance of this is that for Hume only ideas are true or false. Thus his conclusion that "morality, therefore, is more properly felt than judg'd of." (T 470) He then goes on to ask what the nature of these impressions are, and answers that they are pleasures and pains that are aroused in us by the characters or actions of people when these are considered from a general point of view without special reference to our own particular interests.

Hume was sometimes an inconsistent writer, but his moral epistemology is pretty much the same in the Enquiry as it is in the Treatise. Evidently, he had seen no reason to change his mind and was satisfied with what he had said. The parts of the Enquiry that are especially relevant are Section I and Appendix I. He wants to know whether morals "be derived from Reason, or from Sentiment," or stated in another way, "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 the particular fabric and constitution of the human species." (E 170) He will later conclude in Appendix I that (1) morality is a decision that sentiment makes and (2) morals, like beauty and deformity, are based upon the nature of the human species, so that if their natures were changed so would their morals.

The ground plan of the Appendix can be quickly summarized. Hume begins by admitting that reason has a considerable role to play in matters of morals, because it is only by means of reason that the tendencies of actions can be determined; his next step, however, is to show that it is sentiment that determines whether these tendencies are good or bad. The body of the Appendix is devoted to proving that neither demonstrative nor experimental reasoning can take this last step. Hume concludes by identifying the moral decision with the last step, which is made by sentiment. He himself puts it this way:

> But after every circumstance, every relation is known, the understanding has no further room to operate, nor any object on which it could employ itself. The approbation or blame which then ensues, cannot be the work of the judgement, but of the heart; and is not a speculative proposition or affirmation,

> but an active feeling or sentiment. (E 290)

In other words, after inductive reason has done its work, there is nothing left for an alleged moral or practical reason to do.

In the parts of the Treatise and the second Enquiry that I have discussed Hume seems to make a sharp distinction between reason and taste: reason, if it is successful, provides us with knowledge of reality which is the same for all intelligent beings, whereas taste is an emotional reaction to the facts discovered and depends on the nature of the being making the discovery. This is more or less the way that Kemp Smith summarizes Appendix I to the second Enquiry, but he does not see that this requires a revision, or at least a clarification, of what is perhaps his major thesis. Instead, his only response is to suggest that the Appendix is untypical. Why was Kemp Smith not more concerned? I will suggest that it is the protean character of the terms "reason" and "feeling" that concealed from him the fact that the parallelism in Hume between morality and belief is not as complete as he supposed.

"Reason" is one of Hume's most ambiguous terms. Sometimes when he uses "reason" he means demonstration, at other times he is obviously referring to probable reasoning even when no qualifying adjective is used, sometimes he uses "reason" in the meaning of reflection with reflection being opposed to mechanical response, and sometimes the term is used in an extremely loose sense to refer to all kinds of inference, probable or demonstrative, conscious or automatic. Reason as demonstration, concerned as it is with relations of ideas and what can be deduced therefrom, has nothing to say about realities, and thus has only an indirect relation to belief or action. In that sense reason is neither the foundation of morality nor belief. But what is important

is the meaning that the term has when reason is contrasted with morality, and here it is pretty obvious that Hume is thinking about causal reasoning, because it is causal reasoning that tells us the way the world is, and when Hume says its standard "is founded on the nature of things, is eternal and inflexible, even by the will of the Supreme Being," (E 294) he is referring to causal reasoning. And yet Kemp Smith does not recognize, or at least does not consistently recognize, that Hume has a concept of causal reason or inference. The quotation below is typical.

> There is, he argues, no such thing as causal inference. When the mind passes from an idea or impression of one object to that of another, it is the imagination which is operating, not the understanding. It is custom and not reason, habit[9] and not evidence, which is at work.

This is a nest of confusions. When a person or an animal expects fire upon seeing or smelling smoke he performs an inference because this is something that could not be known by consciousness, and is possibly false. The inference is not something over and above the expectation, but it is the expectation itself. I can find no evidence that Hume ever suggested that demonstrative inference is the only kind of inference there is, though he sometimes restricts "inference" to what he calls argument, which is conscious reflection. If he had restricted inference to demonstrative inference, he would have made it a matter of definition that there could be no inference to what happens in the world. The assertion that factual beliefs do not depend on evidence is an assertion that Kemp Smith makes repeatedly. It is true that the capacity to acquire habits is something that is innate (at least, this is Hume's more considered point of view), but this does not mean that animals do not have evidence that where there's

smoke there's fire. The natural "belief" in causation, which in Hume is about the same thing as the ability and readiness to learn from experience, is not itself based on evidence, but without it there could be no such thing as evidence.[10] Secondly, to say that it is the imagination, not the understanding, that is at work when the mind passes from the idea or impression of one object to that of another is to make a contrast that is hard to understand when it is compared with Hume's terminology. In one place the understanding is defined as the "general and more establish'd properties of the imagination." (T 267)[11] Finally, to say that it is custom and not reason that is at work is misleading unless the meaning of "reason" is specified. Although Hume will say things like "'Tis not therefore reason which is the guide of life but custom," in other places custom itself is denominated as a form of reasoning. It is reasoning in this sense that "discovers objects as they really stand in nature." Taste, on the other hand, "has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation." (E 294)

It is an irony that the very words that Hume uses to draw his distinction between reason and taste are interpreted by Kemp Smith in such a way as to practically annul the distinction that Hume is making. Not only is the paragraph from the Appendix to the Enquiry treated in this way, but also the passage from the Green and Grose edition that was quoted earlier, and also a passage from the Treatise in which Hume compares moral and aesthetic qualities to "sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind." (T 469) All of these passages have in common that Hume is trying to distinguish the discoveries of the understanding from the additions that are made by moral and aesthetic sentiments

and in each case he does so by comparing the latter to secondary qualities. The conclusion that Kemp Smith draws is that "the moral, as in the physical field" the mind is creative.[12] But it is a mistake to suppose that for Hume a statement like "Her hair is beautiful" is a statement like "Her hair is auburn." *Sense experiences* are responses of our sense organs to objects in the environment, whereas sentiments are responses of our mind to beliefs about objects that have been acquired by observation and causal reasoning. Primary no less than secondary qualities are perceptions in the mind, and Hume believed that we have no way of knowing whether the qualities of external objects are specifically the same as the qualities of our perceptions. (T 226-31) Nevertheless Hume was willing to accept that our senses (along with causal reasoning) provide us with information about the outside world. To suppose otherwise would be to suppose that Hume's skepticism cut deeper than it did. That that litmus paper will turn blue if put in that liquid and that that metal will expand if heated are truths (or facts) about the litmus paper and the metal, respectively. On the other hand, my moral and aesthetic sentiments are facts about me or my mind. Perhaps Hume is to be faulted for giving the names of properties of physical objects to experiences in minds, and perhaps that is the reason he has been misunderstood, but the bad terminology did not prevent him from ascribing to the mind the power to discover how objects stand in nature independently of the mind.

Kemp Smith's thesis that Hume treats moral judgments as being determined by feeling is, I believe, correct. But he, along with a number of other writers who have followed him, maintain that factual judgments are in the same boat. This is a claim the correctness of which depends on what is meant by "feeling," and Hume has several meanings for "feeling." Sometimes he uses the

term in the narrow sense to refer to secondary impressions (also called impressions of reflection). These include not only feelings that are currently being experienced but also emotional dispositions such as approval and disapproval. This is his normal use of the term. However, he sometimes extends the term to include original impressions (also called impressions of sensation). And sometimes (I believe) the term is used to include habit itself -- a natural outcome of the fact that custom begins to operate on the level of perception and thus helps to constitute the objects of experience that factual belief is about. Belief in all matters of fact, he tells us in the "Abstract," "arises only from custom."[13] Thus, in the following passage Hume is contrasting the moral and aesthetic sentiments which he takes to be secondary impressions, or feelings in the narrow sense, with primary impressions which he takes to be the objects of the understanding. The primary impressions are not feelings in the narrow sense. "Morals and criticism are not so properly objects of the understanding as of taste and sentiment. Beauty, whether moral or natural, is felt, more properly than perceived." (E 165)

Hume's discussions of causal belief is Kemp Smith's principal resource for his contentions that reason is as much a matter of feeling as taste is and that both alike are creative. Hume often refers to belief as a feeling. Though the feeling is hard to describe, there is no doubt that the feeling referred to is a secondary impression. (It is, however, a secondary impression on a lower level than moral and aesthetic sentiments, which are responses to our beliefs about things.) If beliefs are secondary impressions, and nothing but secondary impressions, Hume should not admit that beliefs are true or false. No impressions, primary or secondary, are true or false. Taste and sentiment are

impressions (secondary impressions), and are thus outside the domain of the understanding, which is concerned with truth and falsehood.[14] Since beliefs are arrived at by means of the understanding, it is clear that Hume regards belief, or judgment, as true or false. So a belief must be something more than a feeling. And it is. It is a conception to which is annexed a feeling and the term "belief" usually refers to the conception rather than the feeling, though the conception would not be a belief without the feeling. "An opinion, therefore, or belief may be most accurately defin'd, A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION." (T 96) The belief is true or false not by virtue of its liveliness, but by virtue of the fact that it is an idea.

In his attempts to show that in Hume's thought the mind is as creative as the heart, Kemp Smith puts great store on Hume's analysis of causation, particularly his analysis of the element of necessary connection. The essence of that long and intricate discussion in Hume is that necessary connection is simply the belief that B arises in us if A has just occurred and in the past A has always been followed by B. If the necessary connection is projected onto nature, the mind is indeed being creative. But this analysis of causal necessity is not acceptable to either the scientist or the ordinary man. To them causal necessity is a relation between one event called the cause and another event called the effect. Hume realizes this, but he claims that the term so applied is meaningless. "We have no idea of this connexion," he says in the Enquiry, "nor even any distinct notion what it is we desire to know, when we endeavour at a conception of it." (E 77) Necessary connection, however, is nothing that is apprehended by the understanding. It is the operations of nature that are apprehended by the understanding, and these are "independent of our thought and reasoning." (T 168)

I will end this paper with some caveats. Hume is not all of a piece. It is possible to cull some extravagant statements from Hume which if taken at face value and as representative of the whole would tend to show that the analogy between reason and morality is much closer than I have been trying to make out. One of the favorites is the following: "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." Then he explains the sense in which belief is a matter of taste. "When I give the preference to one set of arguments above another, I do nothing but decide from my feeling concerning the superiority of their influence." (T 103) This is unexceptionable and would be true whether the arguments were demonstrative or probable. It is not, however, how we decide which arguments are best. It is what happens in us after (or when) we see that what we take to be suitable criteria apply.

Two other caveats. I have not meant to deny that there are similarities between morality and reason. One very important similarity is that they are both unavoidable responses of the mind when it is placed in certain circumstances. Finally, Kemp Smith is right to attach great importance to "Reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions." Hume leaned toward pragmatism. Passions are the manifestations in consciousness of needs and interests, and causal reasoning, like other animal instincts, is to be explained in terms of how needs and interests are served.[15]

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1. David Hume, The Letters of David Hume, ed. J.Y.T. Grieg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), vol. I, p. 13.

2. Hume, "An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature," Essays in Philosophy, ed. Houston Peterson (New York: The Pocket Library), p. 26.

3. Quoted in Norman Kemp Smith, The Philosophy of David Hume (London: Macmillan and Co., 1960), p. 19. (Cf. the Green and Grose edition of the Enquiries, p. 10n.)

4. Kemp Smith, p. 20.

5. Hume, Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), p. 294. (Quoted in Kemp Smith, pp. 198-99) Enquiries hereafter cited in text as E.

6. Kemp Smith, p. 200.

7. Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), p. 457. Treatise hereafter cited in text as T.

8. The actual contrast that Hume makes is between demonstration and induction. I know of no instances in which he explicitly recognizes the existence of deductive arguments that are not proofs.

9. Kemp Smith, p. 375.

10. In some of his moods Hume pursues what Strawson calls descriptive metaphysics; in others, the basic principles themselves stand in need of justification. Whereas he will say "Unless nature had given some original qualities to the mind, it cou'd never have any secondary ones" (T 280), he will also say "This instinct [habit], 'tis true, arises from past observation and experience," (T 179). But in the Enquiries his settled opinion seems to be that basic principles can neither be explained nor justified.

11. At T 225 Hume distinguishes in the imagination "principles which are permanent, irresistable, and universal" and "principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular."

12. Kemp Smith, p. 198.

13. "Abstract," p. 18.

14. Hume is willing to allow that moral and aesthetic decisions can be objects of the understanding, but then he says we would be regarding "a new fact." These sociological and anthropological conclusions should not be confused with what had commonly been called moral judgments.

15. In this paper I have not tried to state what Hume's moral theory is; I have been concerned only with trying to show that the parallelism between morality and reason is not as great as Kemp Smith supposed. Hume did not believe that there could be any such thing as morality in the absence of people who respond to actions with feelings of approval or disapproval. But no more importance is to be attached to this than two other considerations. 1. Everybody who understands moral situations in the same way (except for a few Neros) will tend to respond with the same feelings. 2. Factual conclusions of the understanding regarding moral situations are true or false, and are the same for every intelligent being who has reasoned correctly, whether or not the being is human.