



## **Hume's Refutation of Wollaston?**

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## HUME'S REFUTATION OF -- WOLLASTON?

Recently while rereading Book III of Hume's Treatise I was struck by an anomaly in the text that I had never noticed before. It consists in the juxtaposition of two arguments Hume offers regarding the source of the moral qualities of our actions. At first I dismissed Hume's arrangement of these arguments as being of little consequence -- one of them appears in a footnote -- but the more I thought about the juxtaposition the more it intrigued and puzzled me. Expecting that it must have been noted by other readers I checked through the literature to find some discussion of it. Since after a long search I have failed to uncover anything, and believing the point, which relates to Hume's central view concerning morality, to be of some interest, I have decided to write this brief paper.

Two passages from § 1, entitled "Moral Distinctions not deriv'd from Reason," of Part I, Book III, are involved. Hume begins the section by arguing that, because of the limited scope of its capacities, reason cannot distinguish between right and wrong or, as he puts it, between virtue and vice, and therefore that it is a mistake to speak of actions as being reasonable or unreasonable. Since Hume's views on this question are well-known and since they are not directly relevant to the point of my paper, I shall not pursue them further, but turn directly to the issue at hand. After having stated his argument at the beginning of § 1 and reached the conclusion that "actions may be laudable or blameable, but they cannot be reasonable or unreasonable,"<sup>1</sup> Hume turns to answer an objection that might be made against him by a rationalist ethicist. He writes:

But perhaps it may be said, that tho' no will or action can be immediately contradictory to reason, yet we may find such a contradiction in some of the attendants of the action, that is, in its causes or effects (T 459).

Pursuing this objection, Hume first considers the causes of our actions. He acknowledges that we can be led astray in what we do in two ways; by making mistakes of fact, first, about the nature of some object we desire (e.g., thinking some fruit delicious when it really is not) and, second, about the means we should employ to gain the object (e.g., attempting to pluck the fruit when it is beyond our reach). Although these errors cause us to act in ways that may be termed unreasonable in a "figurative and improper way of speaking" (T 459), they cannot be the source of any immorality in what we do because they are committed involuntarily and innocently. A person who falls into such errors and acts on them is "more to be lamented than blam'd" (T 459).

To conclude his answer to the rationalistic objection he has raised, Hume turns next to the issue of whether the immorality of our actions can be explained in terms of the unreasonableness of any of their effects. In a memorable passage he denies that the fact that false judgments are the effects of our actions can be the source of immorality in what we do.

As to those judgments which are the effects of our actions, and which, when false, give occasion to pronounce the actions contrary to truth and reason; we may observe, that our actions never cause any judgment, either true or false, in ourselves, and that 'tis only on others they have such an influence. 'Tis certain, that an action, on many occasions, may give rise to false conclusions in others; and that a

person, who thro' a window sees any lewd behaviour of mine with my neighbour's wife, may be so simple as to imagine she is certainly my own. In this respect my action resembles somewhat a lye or falshood; only with this difference, which is material, that I perform not the action with any intention of giving rise to a false judgment in another, but merely to satisfy my lust and passion. It causes, however, a mistake and false judgment by accident; and the falshood of its effects may be ascribed, by some odd figurative way of speaking, to the action itself. But still I can see no pretext of reason for asserting, that the tendency to cause such an error is the first spring or original source of all immorality (T 461).

But on this point Hume is not content to give simply a general answer to the rationalists, of whom there were many among his contemporaries. In a long footnote appended to the passage I have just quoted, he moves over to the offensive, attacking the rationalistic claim that a foundation can be given for our judgments of moral right and wrong by an appeal to truth and falsity.

One might think it were entirely superfluous to prove this, if a late author [Wollaston], who has had the good fortune to obtain some reputation, had not seriously affirmed, that such a falshood is the foundation<sup>2</sup> of all guilt and moral deformity.

Continuing his footnote Hume offers four different objections to Wollaston's view that the immorality of an action lies in its giving rise to false conclusions. It is the second of these (which consists of three examples reiterating the same point) that gives rise to the present paper. Hume begins this objection by referring directly back to the illustration he had offered in his main text:

...if I had used the precaution of shutting the windows, while I indulg'd myself in those liberties with my neighbour's wife, I should have been guilty of no immorality; and that because my action, being perfectly conceal'd, wou'd have had no tendency to produce any false conclusions (T 461 n.)

He then continues the argument by offering two more examples:

For the same reason, a thief, who steals in by a ladder at a window, and takes all imaginable care to cause no disturbance, is in no respect criminal. For either he will not be perceiv'd, or if he be, 'tis impossible he can produce any error, nor will anyone, from these circumstances, take him to be other than what he really is.

'Tis well-known, that those who are squint-sighted, do very readily cause mistakes in others, and that we imagine they salute or are talking to one person, while they address themselves to another. Are they, therefore, upon that account immoral? (T 462 n.).

Hume does not elaborate the conclusion to be drawn against Wollaston from these examples, but it is fairly obvious. If, for example, the immorality of Hume's lewd behaviour with his neighbour's wife turns on the question of whether someone else draws an erroneous conclusion from it, a possibility that he can foreclose by closing the curtains, it follows that the wrongness of the act lies not in the act itself but rather in its producing the erroneous conclusion. When the curtains are closed and no conclusion is drawn, the act is not wrong. In other words, Wollaston's theory, Hume argues, takes the predicates "right" and "wrong" away from the actions themselves, leaving them with no moral character of their own. And such a consequence constitutes its

sufficient refutation. If this consequence really does follow from Wollaston's ethics,<sup>3</sup> Hume seems clearly to be right; his objection does demolish it.

So much, then, for Hume's critique of Wollaston. Leaving it, Hume returns to a further attack on the role of reason in our judgments of right and wrong. After a lengthy discussion he comes, near the end of § 1, to a statement of his own views on the source of the moral qualities that we attribute to our actions. This is the famous theory now known in the literature as ethical subjectivism. Hume states it, in a provocative and dramatic form, in another memorable passage:

Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. 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, toward 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. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it (T 468-469).

My object in this paper is not to join the host of critics who have attacked the ethical subjectivism which seems to be so unequivocally affirmed in this remarkable statement but rather simply to note the striking parallel between Hume's view here and the position he has a few pages earlier

attributed to Wollaston. True, there are differences between the two. For Wollaston the adjectives, moral or immoral, have their source in the head (they are judgments); for Hume they have their source in the heart (they are feelings). Also, Hume would say that the adjectives can be generated by the person who had committed the act -- that is, he can later have a feeling of disapprobation about what he has done -- but for Wollaston the judgment must be made by someone else. But these are differences of detail. On the essential point -- that the source of the morality or immorality of an action lies not in the action itself but elsewhere, in the response of some observer -- the two theories are in agreement. Since Hume's attack on Wollaston's theory rests on this feature of the latter's position, which his own theory shares, it is equally an attack on himself. To the extent that Hume refutes Wollaston he also refutes Hume.

This leaves one further, intriguing question. Why did Hume do it? How can one explain his levelling an objection against Wollaston, which he presumably considered to be decisive, and then proceeding almost immediately to state a theory to which the same objection obviously applies? I cannot answer this question but will conclude by offering a few suggestions about a possible explanation.

First, it might be, and has been said by a few commentators that to read the last passage I have quoted as a statement of ethical subjectivism is to misunderstand Hume's meaning. Hume was not a subjectivist, therefore the passage must be dismissed as "Humean hyperbole."<sup>4</sup> Although I have grave reservations about reinterpretations of Hume that make him out not to be a subjectivist, I think it quite possible, knowing Hume, that he was indulging

in a bit of hyperbole here. Yet numerous other passages can be cited in which he reiterates the same view, even in his Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, published eleven years after Book III of the Treatise.<sup>5</sup> Hyperbole, long and often repeated, takes on the color of conviction. In any case, the issue of Hume's exact position on the source of moral attributes is, at best, only tangentially relevant to the puzzle that concerns me here. If Hume didn't really mean what he said in the "wilful murder" passage, then, if he recognized that it succumbs to the same objection that he had just levelled against Wollaston, he would surely, one should expect, have offered some explanation to clear up the confusion. But he never does this. Why not?

A second possible answer to our question is to attribute the parallelism of the arguments to Humean irony. On this view Hume knew exactly what he was doing, deliberately championing a theory having implications identical to those of Wollaston's view he had just attacked. Although most readers of Hume appreciate and enjoy his irony, one has to wonder whether he would carry it so far. With Hume, I think it may be possible but still very doubtful. At the very least, one would expect some clue in the text to indicate his own awareness of the anomaly, and hence the irony, but I have found none.

My final suggestion is a straightforward one and, I think, the most persuasive of the three: that Hume simply failed to notice that his objection to Wollaston could be turned with equal force against himself. For obvious reasons I put this hypothesis forward with some hesitation; nevertheless it gains considerable plausibility from what we know and can infer about the writing and publication of the Treatise. According to Hume's own account he had

completed his composition of the Treatise before he was twenty-five years old.<sup>6</sup> This would mean a date no later than April, 1736. However, Book III was published only in 1740. We know also that, after returning from France to London in 1737, Hume made a number of changes in the manuscript.<sup>7</sup> Some Hume scholars believe that these changes included the addition of the Wollaston footnote on pages 461-462.<sup>8</sup> If this assumption is correct, it means that there may have been a gap of upwards of four years between the time that Hume wrote his "wilful murder" passage in the text and that in which he added his criticism of Wollaston in the footnote. If the events occurred as this hypothesis describes them, it is understandable that Hume might have failed to remember that his own theory paralleled that of Wollaston in a way to make it vulnerable to the same kind of attack he levelled against the latter.

Whether any of the three explanations I offer of the odd anomaly in Hume's argument is correct I do not know. But they are the best suggestions I have been able to devise. Perhaps someone else has a better way of resolving the puzzle. If so, I should like to hear it.

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1. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L.A. Selby-Biggs (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1888), p. 458. Further references to the Treatise will be inserted into the text.
2. Treatise, p. 461, n. Hume does not himself identify his opponent in this footnote, Wollaston's name being inserted by the editor, Selby-Biggs. The attribution, however, is almost surely correct.

3. Some recent writers have risen to Wollaston's defense, claiming that Hume has misrepresented his moral theory. See, for example, S. Tweyman, Reason and Conduct in Hume and his Predecessors (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 103-111, and J. Feinberg, "Wollaston and His Critics," Journal of the History of Ideas 38 (1977), 345-352. Since the question of Hume's scholarly accuracy is not pertinent to my point, I shall not pursue it.
4. D.F. Norton, David Hume (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 109. Norton writes as follows:
 

A not untypical Humean hyperbole has apparently prevented numerous readers from recognizing this fact, as well as a second of equal significance: Hume is not an affective subjectivist in morals. He does not claim that morality is merely sentiment, feeling, approbation, or disapprobation. On the contrary, Hume is a moral realist who believes that virtue and vice have objective status...
5. A pertinent passage from the Enquiry reads as follows: "The hypothesis which we embrace is plain. It maintains that morality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation; and vice the contrary." An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, Appendix I, p. 289.
6. See Letter to Gilbert Elliot of Minto [1751], in The Letters of David Hume, ed. J.Y.T. Grieg (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1932), I, 158.
7. See The Letters of David Hume, I, 23-25 [Letter to Henry Home].
8. D.D. Raphael, for example, writes as follows: "The Treatise does almost name Wollaston at the beginning of a long footnote.... The footnote will have been added at a late stage, perhaps when Hume was revising the proofs...." D.D. Raphael, "Hume's Critique of Ethical Rationalism," in Hume and the Enlightenment, ed. W.B. Todd (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1974), p. 28.