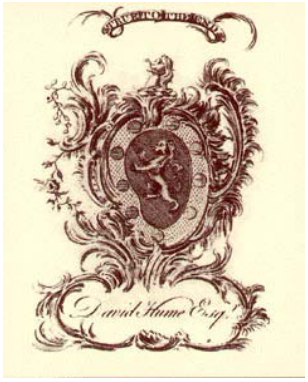

Hume's Apology
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HUME'S APOLOGY

Imagine our reaction if some moralist were to pronounce, in all apparent seriousness, that even the best people do not live up to what morality requires of them, and it is a good thing that they do not. Suppose he then offers an apology in behalf of humankind, an excuse for our moral mediocrity: we are painfully limited creatures, our lives are so complex, events are so ambiguous, there are so many contingencies -- in short, we can't help it. Besides, humanity is better off when people are not too strict in their moral stance. Certainly we would be surprised, even shocked, by these assertions. After a little reflection we would want to scrutinize the conception of morality which figures in this moralist's reasoning -- has he been entranced by some false and unworkable ideal? Something has surely gone wrong.

David Hume apparently has the viewpoint we have imagined. He offers the apology, the excuse, in a little-noticed footnote in the Enquiry Concerning Morals.[1] If it were another philosopher we might let this strange note pass as a slip or oddity, but with Hume we must take the apology seriously.[2]

The truth is that Hume's innocent-seeming footnote of moral apology precisely touches a sore spot in modern ethical theory, a point of instability which threatens to topple the whole edifice that rests on the twin cornerstones of Hume and Kant. Only recently has any clear awareness of the problem begun to emerge in the philosophical literature.[3] In this paper I will draw attention to the problem of which Hume's apology seems to be a warning sign.

I. Hume's Picture of Morality

If we are to appreciate Hume's apology, we must first remind ourselves of the things morality, in Hume's view of it, requires of people.

Hume's account of value is founded upon a general fact of nature, namely, that animals react with feelings in a wide variety of circumstances. These feelings may be crudely categorized as pleasures and pains. Our natural reactions form the basis for every judgment of value, however refined; at bottom what is good, in Hume's view, is pleasurable experience and what is bad is painful experience. There are two kinds of case to be considered. We may find something immediately pleasant or painful, as when we taste chocolate or burn our hand on the stove, or we may find that a thing produces a pleasant or painful result, as when manure makes plants thrive or salt kills the grass. In the latter kind of case the thing is good (or bad) because of its utility. For Hume all assertions concerning value must hinge on immediate feeling reactions, utility, or both.

Now someone might hastily conclude that Hume must be a subjectivist in ethics. After all, if he thinks the whole enterprise of valuing things rests upon our feeling reactions, which are notoriously variable, then he must hold that value judgments are variable too. Moral communication becomes a matter of venting each individual's supply of feelings and radical relativism threatens to engulf us.

However, we do not as yet have Hume's finished picture of morality; the most important qualification remains to be seen. Hume will effectively quell the threat of subjectivism by showing how we can and do adopt standards in the area of feeling.[4] We do so for the sake of being able to

communicate regarding values, especially the important moral values.

The general problem of communication, for Hume, is the problem of transferring ideas (mental pictures) from one mind to another using language as a medium. In the Enquiry Concerning Morals it is taken for granted that we can communicate our ideas. Moral communication involves something more, namely, the transfer of feelings as well as ideas. If moral communication is successful, the parties involved will actually share a feeling. How do we manage to transfer feelings? We use language, but the words we use are special ones. They contain as part of their meaning, their sense, something which moral beings feel. The meaning of a word can include a pleasure or a pain, and not merely in thought but in experience. (If somebody calls you a liar, for instance, your reaction will probably show that the word hurt you.) We have a large vocabulary of words which carry emotional energy as a crucial part of their meaning.[5]

Anything less than moral unanimity represents some type of failure, in Hume's view. Complete and absolute moral agreement is possible in every case where two or more people take up a moral question. Agreement would be actual except for our several ways of failing. Let us consider these and at the same time introduce the remaining elements of Hume's moral apparatus.

(1) The Facts. Every example for study, every situation we find ourselves in, every moral problem, is constituted by the facts. If moral communication is to occur, the people involved have to get the facts straight about the example, the situation, the problem at hand. There has to be a basic shared understanding of what we are talking

about if we are to succeed. Getting the facts requires a certain level of intelligence, patience, honesty, and in a word reasonableness, which people do not always display. It should not be supposed that finding the facts will be effortless; often there will be strenuous activity involved. In several places Hume discusses the procedures needed for gathering facts.[6] This is the first stage at which we may fail.

(2) The Moral Point of View. Some facts are relevant to a moral conclusion and other facts are not. Generally we can say that the facts about pleasure and/or pain in any given context are going to be morally relevant. Notoriously people do arrive at different "moral conclusions" even where they have the same facts before them. But Hume insists that we are capable of objectivity here, that there is such a thing as correct moral reasoning. What moral objectivity requires is a special point of view. It is the viewpoint of humanity, which is to say, the viewpoint of any person, considered apart from his special interests or concerns.

> Every man's interest is peculiar to himself, and the aversions and desires, which result from it, cannot be supposed to affect others in a like degree. General language, therefore, being formed for general use, must be moulded on some more general views, and must affix the epithets of praise or blame, in conformity to sentiments, which arise from the general interests of the community. (E 228)

> ... we every day meet with persons who are in a situation different from us, and who could never converse with us were we to remain constantly in that position and point of view, which is peculiar to ourselves. The intercourse of sentiments, therefore, in society and conversation, makes us

> form some general unalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners. (E 229)

The way we achieve objectivity in the moral arena is analogous to what we do regarding our communication about objects in the physical world. (E 227-8) To communicate about objects we have to adopt an objective standpoint and speak from that position. In the case of a square object, for instance, the objective viewpoint would be the point from which the object's four sides appear to be equal and its angles look to be ninety degrees each. What we say from the objective viewpoint can then be verified by anybody else who is willing to be objective.

We do the same thing for moral perceptions; we adopt an objective stance toward the facts. It is an exercise of reason and imagination. We set aside our personal preferences; we "neglect" all the differences between individuals, because it is those differences which tend to skew our perceptions and render them merely idiosyncratic.

Here is another opportunity for failure. We can fail to adopt the requisite objective point of view, yet speak as though we had done so. We are not too surprised when a mother cannot or will not be objective regarding her children, or a businessman regarding the policies and practices of his company. We can understand why others do not feel as <u>they</u> do about a particular child who repeatedly bites his schoolmates or a particular chimney belching noxious black smoke.

(3) <u>The Feelings</u>. When we adopt the objective viewpoint and then consider the facts of a case, we may experience a reaction of feeling. It will be a pleasure or a pain, of the specific kind which Hume terms approval and disapproval. This is

the foundation of natural reactions upon which morality rests. Hume asserts that the reactions are at bottom the same for all of us; we are, as it were, wired the same way. This isomorphism is a basic article of faith for Hume. His arguments in support of it simply appeal to his reader's sense of what a human being is.

> How, indeed, we suppose it possible in any one, who wears a human heart, that if there be subjected to his censure, one character or system of conduct, which is beneficial, and another which is pernicious to his species or community, he will not so much as give a cool preference to the former, or ascribe to it the smallest merit or regard? Let us suppose such a person ever so selfish; let private interest have ingrossed ever so much his attention; yet in instances, where that is not concerned, he must unavoidably feel some propensity to the good of mankind, and make it an object of choice, if everything else be equal. Would any man, who is walking along, tread as willingly on another's gouty toes, whom he has no quarrel with, as on the hard flint and pavement? (E 225-6)

A bit further on Hume presses the same point even more forcefully.

> ... we must, a priori, conclude it impossible for such a creature as man to be totally indifferent to the well or ill-being of his fellow-creatures.... (E 230)

Here is a necessary condition for being human, Hume suggests; we will not call a creature human unless this much is present.

Having the 'right' feeling reactions, that is, the same ones other humans have, is the ultimate prerequisite for moral communication. Here is the third possible point of failure. It represents the possibility that somebody might have his internal

wires crossed, so that things which please most people cause this individual pain.

> A creature, absolutely malicious and spiteful, were there any such in nature, must be worse than indifferent to the images of vice and virtue. All his sentiments must be inverted, and directly opposite to those, which prevail in the human species. (E 226)

> Absolute, unprovoked, disinterested malice has never perhaps place in any human breast; or if it had, must there pervert all the sentiments of morals, as well as the feelings of humanity. (E 227)

It is clear that Hume does not expect to find many problems arising at this primitive level. What does happen quite commonly is that an individual's sympathetic feeling reaction will be "much fainter" than his concern for himself; and "sympathy with persons remote from us much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous...." (E 229) Happily, this imbalance of intensity in our feelings does not particularly affect our moral judgments, because as we have seen not just any feeling is relevant to our moral determinations. When we adopt the proper moral point of view it becomes easy to sort our feelings in the required way. We can then "neglect" irrelevant feelings, strong though they may be, and form our judgment only upon the "public and social" sentiments. These specifically moral judgments have "a considerable influence, and being sufficient, at least for discourse, serve all our purposes in company, in the pulpit, on the theatre, and in the schools." (E 229)

II. The Apology

Here is the footnote in which Hume offers his apology in behalf of humankind.

> It is wisely ordained by nature, that private connexions should commonly prevail over universal views and considerations; otherwise our affections and actions would be dissipated and lost, for want of a proper limited object. Thus a small benefit done to ourselves, or our near friends, excites more lively sentiments of love and approbation than a great benefit done to a distant commonwealth: But still we know here, as in all the senses, to correct these inequalities by reflection, and retain a general standard of vice and virtue, founded chiefly on general usefulness. (E 229n)

We should not be lulled into complacency by the mild tone of this apology. Hume is acknowledging that commonly people do not permit the moral point of view to prevail in their actions, their preferences, their sentiments; we do not do what morality requires of us. This is to admit that morality is not practical, or not practical to the extent that we are apt to suppose. It is adequate for our purposes "in company, in the pulpit, on the theatre, and in the schools." What are these purposes? In each case we want to communicate something -- to strangers, or to people who are apt to be strangers. In the pulpit we preach the gospel and exhort our congregation to steer away from sinfulness. In the schools we want to teach and instill values as well as information and technical abilities. A drama in the theatre is often intended to convey some moral lesson. And in company we like to moralize in a manner that creates or elicits agreement. What we do to ensure communication in these contexts is to employ an emotional common denominator. Naturally "the heart

takes not part entirely with those general notions" (E 229), because the things being preached or dramatized do not touch the whole of who we are as human individuals. Still, we are able to get by in these public and social situations, and that is worthwhile.

Thus it appears that strictly speaking morality is not woven into our everyday lives. We do not every day find a need to moralize from the pulpit or even in company. We focus daily attention on our private connections and on private goods; upon the whole it does not even occur to us to scrutinize things from a universal point of view.

The striking point is that Hume thinks it is a good thing that people are not more engrossed and involved in morality than they are. It is wisely ordained by nature that private connections prevail over the objective dictates of morality. Why, exactly, is it a good thing? It is apparently because we are so limited as individuals; we have limited amounts of love and sympathy, limited powers of action. That is why we must in general have "a proper limited object" to link with our affections and actions, lest they be "dissipated and lost." The message is clear: human beings mainly do not govern themselves from a moral standpoint, but we really should not be blamed for that. We cannot help it. We are not godlike in powers or perceptions.

III. Is Hume's Apology Ironic?

It is worth considering whether Hume is being ironical in making his apology. J.V. Price has made it clear that irony was a constant mode of expression in Hume's life.[7] "Irony gave him a method of operating in a world that found his ideas both strange and shocking...." (p. 4) "Hume, writing

for an audience accustomed to subtle irony, would expect his reader to be aware of his methods; the least a modern reader can do is to be on guard for them." (p. 13)

Price says that "Hume uses predominantly two forms [of irony]: (a) that which is usually called 'cosmic irony,' but which asks the reader to add the ironic tone himself; and (b) that which means the opposite of what one says." (p. 7)

Let us first consider whether Hume might have meant the opposite of what he said. He does this with surprising frequency and smoothness.[8] Perhaps it is so in the passage which concerns us. In that case his real meaning would be either that nature is not wise in its arrangements or else that the arrangement is not really ordained by nature at all. Neither of these is immediately plausible. It is easy to appreciate how impractical it would be, for instance, for a worker to objectively reconsider each payday where in the entire world his money would do the most good. It works better if the worker attends to his own debts and to the well-being of people near to him. And it does seem that this truth is "ordained by nature" partly because our minds are too limited even to consider all the worldwide data and partly because there is simply too much in the world that needs doing. There is too much suffering and pain worldwide for an individual's efforts to make a discernible difference. We cannot extend our individual responsibility so far -- we would get too disheartened. Paralysis may well result if we believe it is our moral duty to do what we cannot do. So nature is indeed wise.

It may be objected that this interpretation of the objectivity requirement of morality goes overboard if it expects human individuals to take

account of all the goods in the world. It is enough, surely, if an agent takes account of all that can reasonably be perceived from her position; she would know the goods available to her, to people in her community, and to a much lesser extent, to people farther away. There is little doubt that people could operate from an objective point of view within their own limited circle of perception; at the very least, people could employ the moral point of view more frequently than they do. If everybody did so, our lives would be transformed (it may be argued). The average level of human well-being would be much higher than it is now because miserable, hungry, needy individuals would be morally impossible to tolerate in our midst. At the same time, the transformation would involve giving up friendships and family life as we know it. If an individual in making objective judgments "neglects all the differences" which make her the specific person she is, if she truly adopts the viewpoint of Anybody, she will have no way to preserve the special status she formerly allotted to her friends and family.[9] In the envisioned "moral" form of life, countless people will have an equal right to her beneficence; the fact that one person happens to be her biological progenitor should not make a moral difference. But friendship and family relationships are precious to us. We would never willingly sacrifice them just to achieve a state of abstract virtue and consistency. So nature is wise to let our private connections prevail.

We may have taken a false step. Must the objective point of view necessarily be blind to special human relationships? No. There is no limit to the facts which can be considered from a moral viewpoint. Morality simply requires an impersonal

judgment. Thus it might be considered morally necessary that a person give special consideration to her father or to her close friend; these relationships must be considered in any attempt to distribute one's goods fairly.[10] And it might be the case that the ultimate impersonal goals of morality are best achieved if individuals do not so much as think of taking an impersonal viewpoint in a variety of contexts, for instance, where a spouse or father or close friend is concerned.

But this stance seems unacceptably paradoxical and outlandishly false to the facts of moral life. (It is as though an alien, a Martian, were trying to make sense of our morality and concluded that each of us is internally split between an abstract conceptual structure and a concrete set of felt responses.) But it is not the case; it is not an actual experience that we are (or ought to be) internally split in this manner. In fact the more our personality is unified, the better things tend to go from the moral standpoint. Something has gone wrong, not with nature or natural arrangements, but with the account we have given of morality. Maybe <u>that</u> is the message we should take from Hume's apology. The cosmic irony is not that nature is unwise, or human individuals unlimited; it is that we have been drawn into a philosophical vision of moral life which falsifies as much as it illuminates!

IV. The Bugaboo of Subjectivity

Modern moral philosophy begins from the desire to make some coherent sense of an apparent chaos of actions and motivations. Human individuals are bewildering in the sheer variety of their actions and avowed motivations. It seems that almost anything can move a human being to action. Is there

some unified theory which we could use to explain us to ourselves, especially when it comes to our values?

Consider for a moment the apparent chaos which a quick look at the human scene discovers. If we proceed from case to particular case, ascertaining each time what factors influence and move the agent, we find that all is contingency. It seems there is no limit to the range of things people can want, or to things which people subjectively treat as reasons for their actions. At the level of pure personal subjectivity, it appears that philosophy has nothing to say.

Happily, people are capable of objectivity in their thinking about actions and reasons for action. Modern philosophy, in part thanks to Hume, views morality as a precious means of injecting objectivity into the human scene. Here a philosophically innocent person might want to ask <u>how much</u> objectivity there is, or how much there ought to be, in human life? The answer, according to Hume and the whole modern tradition, is that objectivity does not come in degrees. It is all or nothing. To make a proper objective judgment, to give reasons which other people can be expected to understand, we have to adopt an impersonal stance. We can then present facts which anybody can detect and which will produce the same kind of feeling reaction in every one of us. Our minds are so constituted, Hume thinks, that we hold such a fact not as a mere thought but rather as a calm passion. Hume argues that such a passion can prevail in action and judgment over much stronger sensations. When would it prevail? Whenever an individual is determined to be good in the moral sense.

In the past decade some philosophers have begun to challenge the idea that an impartial or

impersonal point of view is definitive of morality. Lawrence Blum typifies these thinkers when he argues that impartiality is incumbent upon us only in certain moral contexts (institutional-role contexts) and not in others (for instance, in cases involving friendship). The criticism in effect is that the traditional view we derive from Hume is mistaken because it is one-sided. It fits some cases, but neglects or misrepresents others. This has been a popular form of criticism since Wittgenstein pronounced: "A main cause of philosophical disease -- a one-sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example."[11] However, there is a hazard in this procedure. We may unwittingly grant too much to the ideas we attack. Thus it would not be at all satisfactory to say of Thales' view (that everything is made of water) that it fits some cases and not others; Thales' view is not true in the case of ice cubes. Similarly, we may be granting far too much to Hume and his countless followers if we say that the moral requirement of a "general" or impersonal point of view fits only a select range of cases. He meant something quite universal and necessary about morality.

The lesson we could take from an appreciation of Hume's discomfort is that we need a better understanding of what objectivity comes to in moral contexts. The old model, of rules which are the same for everybody, was designed to meet the threat of radical subjectivity -- the special legacy of Cartesianism. Nowadays most philosophers will agree that Descartes' evil demon is a harmless bugaboo ... even as they demoniacally cling to the old idea of the objective world of facts. What is wonderful is that Hume, with his ironic apology, was sufficiently

acute to warn his reader that something is awry in his own attempt to conquer the bugaboo.

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1. David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, Selby-Bigge second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 229. I will also make some references to Hume's Treatise, Selby-Bigge edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960). All references in the text to Enquiry will be indicated by E, followed by the page numbers.

2. Those readers familiar with Hume's philosophical writings will testify that the apology's placement in a footnote does not mark it as a trivial insertion or minor afterthought. Quite the contrary. Hume has been known to bury some of his best lines, the devastating observations and qualifications, in a footnote. Often Hume's footnotes should be printed in red to warn the unwary.

3. Lawrence A. Blum, Friendship, Altruism, and Morality (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); Andrew Oldenquist, "Loyalties," Journal of Philosophy, 79 (1982), pp. 173-193; Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," Journal of Philosophy, 73 (1976); John Kekes, "Morality and Impartiality," American Philosophical Quarterly, 18 (1981), pp. 295-303; Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," in Moral Luck (Cambridge: 1981), pp. 1-19.

4. See Treatise, pp. 581, 582, 603; Enquiry, pp. 227-229.

5. See my "Hume's Catalog of Virtue and Vice," The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy, VII (1976), pp. 45-57.

6. See Enquiry, Section X, "Of Miracles," pp. 109-31, for an extended discussion of what it is to be reasonable in one's beliefs. One can find in Hume's writings many discussions about being

reasonable. For instance, see Letter #215, to Rev. Hugh Blair, in The Letters of David Hume, 2 vols., edited by J.Y.T. Grieg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932).

7. J.V. Price, The Ironic Hume (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965).

8. For instance, "And as nature has implanted in every one a superior affection to his own country, we never expect any regard to distant nations, where a competition arises." (E 225n) Nature has implanted no such thing! Hume's tongue is firmly in cheek here.

9. For a fuller presentation of this argument, see Lawrence Blum, "Friendship, Beneficence, and Impartiality," in his book, Friendship, Altruism, and Morality, pp. 43-66.

10. Stephen Darwall argues this way in an unpublished manuscript, "Impartialist Ethics and the Personal." See also his book Impartial Reason (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), especially Chapter 11, pp. 130-145. It is interesting that Hume goes part of the way toward this position in a footnote: -- "...while every man consults the good of his own community, we are sensible, that the general interest of mankind is better promoted, than by any loose indeterminate views to the good of a species, whence no beneficial action could ever result, for want of a duly limited object, on which they could exert themselves." (E 225n)

11. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, #593.