



A Personal Element in Morality

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A PERSONAL ELEMENT IN MORALITY

In his quest for the truth about moral life, Hume steers between the Scylla of Sentiment and the Charybdis of Reason. Sentiment operating alone, as a basis for morality, would threaten to engulf humanity with as many relativistic moral truths as there are individuals. Reason alone would produce objective, impersonal truths, but these would be powerless to move us. Hume's developed theory ingeniously shows how Reason and Sentiment can operate together, to produce judgments based on feelings which are nonetheless impersonal and objective¹ (T 581-584; E 227-229).

Hume is acutely aware (as we shall see below) that there exists a considerable disparity between the impartiality required of us by moral theory and what in practice people think when it comes to moral matters. There would seem to be only two ways of accommodating this fact. One is to regard the disparity as a mark of the moral mediocrity of ordinary people; we are not as objective in our judgments as we could be. The other way is to treat the disparity as a token of failure and inadequacy in the theory; our best philosophical reasoning about morals fails to capture its subject matter without distortion. Our rational powers fall short, not only in Book I of the Treatise, where the task is to explain the foundation of our beliefs, but also in Book III, where Hume attempts to elucidate moral life.

Certainly the first way would reduce the gap to some extent; some people, perhaps many, are moral truly low achievers. I want to show that Hume also suggests the second way; he is willing to deflate the

pretensions of philosophy, even when it comes to his own state-of-the-art efforts.

I. The Objectivity of Certain Feeling-Based Judgments

In the moral arena of life we make judgments which are based on feelings, on "certain sentiments of pleasure or disgust" (T 581). "To have the sense of virtue, is nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character" (T 471). Of course not just any feeling will do; it must be of a peculiar kind, which we can experience only under specific conditions.

At first Hume characterizes the necessary condition as follows:

'Tis only when a character is considered in general, without reference to our particular interest, that it causes such a feeling or sentiment, as denominates it morally good or evil (T 472).

Later on Hume provides a fuller account. Characteristically he elaborates in response to an anticipated objection. The objection is that our sympathetic feelings of pleasure and pain fluctuate wildly, depending mainly upon our distance, so to speak, from the character we assess, in space, time, and kind of relationship. Our moral judgments do not vary in this way; we give the same approbation to the same moral qualities in China as in England (T 581). So (it is concluded) our moral judgments do not rest upon sympathy.

Hume's response is that, as a necessary condition for moral judgment and communication, we must "fix on some steady and general points of view" (T 581-2). He proceeds to employ an analogy with our situation regarding perception of (and communication about) the things which make up our common world.

Here a man obviously cannot consider things "only as they appear from his peculiar point of view" (T 581). For instance I cannot describe my desk to a friend by reporting on how I perceive it at this moment -- because at this moment the light is dim and I am standing across the room from the desk. If I were to do a painting of the scene before me, the desk would be black, its top a trapezoid shape on the canvas. What I say, however, is that I have a walnut desk of a medium brown color and it has a rectangular top. I say, in effect, how the desk would look under standard conditions of light and perspective.

In the Enquiry version Hume spells out his analogy more fully. Again he addresses the case in which our sentiments, e.g., about two men, one distant and one close, vary considerably, though our judgments of each man's merit is the same.

The judgment here corrects the inequalities of our internal emotions and perceptions; in like manner, as it preserves us from error, in the several variations of images, presented to our external senses. The same object, at a double distance, really throws on the eye a picture of but half the bulk; yet we imagine that it appears of the same size in both situations; because we know that on our approach to it, its image would expand upon the eye, and that the difference consists not in the object itself, but in our position with regard to it. And, indeed, without such a correction of appearances, both in internal and external sentiment, men could never think or talk steadily on any subject; while their fluctuating situations produce a continual variation on objects, and throw them into such different and contrary lights and positions (E 185-6).

And this, according to Hume, is the way it is with morality; we are capable of objectivity in the

moral arena of life. What objectivity requires is a special point of view, the viewpoint of humanity, which any man can adopt when needed. This adoption is presumably an exercise of reason, a kind of abstraction. A man considers the facts of a case quite apart from his own special interests or concerns; he sets aside or 'neglects' the fact that the case concerns a friend, for instance, or a countryman. If the man persists in this exercise he must eventually reach a point where no personal bias can influence his perception and judgment. He will have achieved what has recently been termed "the view from nowhere."² What facts does one consider from this 'general' survey? In the Treatise Hume says it would be whatever facts would be significant to those "who have any commerce with the person we consider" (T 583). I take this to mean, whatever facts seem morally relevant to the case when it is viewed objectively. When we view the facts in this manner the operation of sympathy will produce a feeling in us, a pleasure or pain, which is like the feeling reaction of those people who are on the scene with the one who interests us. This sympathetic feeling may be faint and weak, "far from being as lively as when our own interest is concern'd, or that of our particular friends" (T 583). It is a happy feature of Hume's theory that the intensity of the sympathetic feeling, as contrasted with more self-centered feelings, is of no particular importance, for the simple reason that the moral point of view determines which feelings are relevant to moral assessments. We can 'neglect' irrelevant feelings, strong though they may be, and form our judgment only upon the "public and social" sentiments.

If we assume, as Hume does,³ that the mechanisms of feeling reaction are at bottom the same

in all of us, that we are as it were wired the same way, then it becomes apparent that moral unanimity is perfectly possible. Moral agreement would actually occur in every argument, every communication, except for our several ways of failing at the task of objective perception.⁴ Thus it would appear that Hume's developed moral theory is potentially as rigorous as its Kantian competitor in its demand for objectivity in moral judgments.⁵

II. The Demand Morality Makes

Hume shows how Reason and Sentiment can operate to produce perfectly objective moral judgments -- but he does not leave it at that. He proceeds to register some observations which are troublesome. He observes that people do not commonly or frequently adopt the general point of view which he has described as a needed condition for moral perception and judgment. The modern reader might hear a note of lament in this observation, a recognition of the woeful moral inadequacy Kant seemed to fear in humankind. But if I am right, Hume is not merely lamenting human frailty; he is acknowledging that the "fully rational" scheme of moral objectivity is not altogether appropriate for us. Hume is sensitive to the fact that 'pure' objectivity would sometimes be morally offensive! It is a way of going wrong, not a way of achieving moral perfection. -- But this is to anticipate.

Let us begin with the gap between theory and practice, or philosophy and common sense. There are many passages in the ethical writings which record Hume's impression that people do not govern themselves in the light of purely objective considerations, e.g., the greatest utility for the greatest number.

Nothing is more certain, than that men are, in a great measure, govern'd by interest, and that even when they extend their concern beyond themselves, 'tis not to any great distance; nor is it usual for them, in common life, to look farther than their nearest friends and acquaintance (T 534).

When experience has once given us a competent knowledge of human affairs, and has taught us the proportion they bear to human passion, we perceive, that the generosity of men is very limited, and that it seldom extends beyond their friends and family, or, at most, beyond their native country (T 602).

We have, all of us, a wonderful partiality for ourselves... (T 597).

These observations are not regarded as occasions for chagrin or lament. Hume uses them to explain, for instance, why we "confine our view to that narrow circle, in which any person moves, in order to form a judgment of his moral character" (T 602). We cannot reasonably expect a person to extend her generosity, for instance, outside that rather narrow circle which constitutes her own life. Hume uses the same observation to point out the need for "universal and inflexible observance of the rules of justice" (T 534). We cannot depend upon a person's natural concern and sympathy for other people when it comes to matters of property and property rights; we must employ artificial devices to compensate for narrow concern and limited sympathy. We create rules concerning property and we invest these with special force or power, so they are regarded as universal and inflexible. Of course none of this would be necessary if we could count on people to base their judgments on an objective, impersonal view of the facts in any given case. Normal people are capable of taking an objective view, but the fact remains,

people often do not adopt the disinterested, objective standpoint. Because of that propensity, as Hume acknowledges, "our passions [do not] often correspond entirely to the present theory." He goes on to explain:

'Tis seldom men heartily love what lies at a distance from them, and what no way redounds to their particular benefit; as 'tis no less rare to meet with persons, who can pardon another any opposition he makes to their interest, however justifiable that opposition may be by the general rules of morality. Here we are contented with saying, that reason requires such an impartial conduct, but that 'tis seldom we can bring ourselves to it, and that our passions do not readily follow the determination of our judgment (T 583).

It may be tempting at first to dismiss this observation as merely the sad empirical truth about the present stage of moral development in humanity; we can still endorse the unqualified demands of reason in the name of moral purity and excellence. This pill becomes difficult to swallow, however, when we realize that it applies to all men, not just to the wicked, the selfish, the vicious. Hume's observation is really that nobody on earth ever comes close to the theoretical depiction of moral excellence. There is something strange here.⁶

Hume buries some helpful lines in an Enquiry footnote:

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 187n).

Here are three observations I want to make about this stunning footnote.

(1) Hume assumes our understanding (as alert philosophers) that in fact people do not commonly assume the universal view as required by morality.

(2) Hume admits that it is a good thing that people are not more engrossed in morality than they actually are. It is wisely ordained by nature that private connections prevail over the objective dictates of morality. Why is it a good thing? Apparently because of our inevitable limitations as human individuals; we have limited amounts of love and sympathy, a limited capacity for attending, limited powers of action. Hence we must have a "proper limited object" to link with our actions and affections. In general we do not and should not govern ourselves from the ideal moral standpoint.

(3) We still retain the general standard and know we can "correct these inequalities" by reference to it. Hume's thought here, in virtually the same words in the Treatise and Enquiry, is the following.

...tho' the heart does not always take part with those general notions, or regulate its love and hatred by them, yet are they sufficient for discourse, and serve all our purposes in company, in the pulpit, on the theatre, and in the schools (T 603; cf. E 186).

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 perhaps exhort our congregation to

repent. In the schools we want to convey and instill values as well as information and technical abilities. A drama in the theatre is often intended to present a moral lesson. And in company we like to moralize in a manner that creates agreement. What we can do to ensure communication in such contexts is to employ a common denominator, a standard of perception and judgment which anybody can use. Naturally the heart is not fully moved by such talk, because the things being preached or dramatized do not touch the whole of who we are as individuals. Still, our ability to use a common denominator enables us to get by in these public and social situations, and that is worthwhile.

At this point a reader might begin to think that Hume will assign morality a rather small, specialized, circumscribed role in human life; perhaps it is analogous to a dictionary, a device which can be used to settle disagreements about the spelling or use of a word. Morality is a device which lets people determine the correct judgment or action. Most people need the dictionary only infrequently, though it is admittedly nice to have one. So too morality.⁷

But Hume's story is not finished. We have seen how morality employs reason to correct our too-narrow perceptions and sentiments. It remains to be appreciated that morality can also employ natural sentiment to correct various excesses of reason.⁸

In a recent book,⁹ David Norton observes that for Hume our sentiments are not only the foundation of moral judgments, "but are also a gauge of moral theories." Norton suggests that on Hume's view

...our moral sentiments can and do correct metaphysical subtleties, namely, those that are part of over-subtle moral theories. Our senti-

ments undercut these theories, bring them down to earth, and offer in their place a plain, unforced interpretation of moral phenomena, a morality of common sense or common sentiment.

Norton is right about this, I think, so "theory correction" is one illustration of the authority of full-functioning sentiment over the productions of reasoning -- in this case, the type of reasoning which leaves us saddled with moral skepticism or other philosophical monstrosities. Thanks to our natural sentiments, we know better.

The corrective role of natural sentiment goes far beyond the policing of wild philosophical generalizations. It may come into play in a case where nothing of philosophical significance is going on. Here is an illustration.

...we always consider the natural and usual force of the passions, when we determine concerning vice and virtue; and if the passions depart very much from the common measures on either side, they are always disapprov'd as vicious. A man naturally loves his children better than his nephews, his nephews better than his cousins, his cousins better than strangers, where every thing else is equal. Hence arises our common measures of duty, in preferring the one to the other. Our sense of duty always follows the common and natural course of our passions (T 483-484).

Thus if a man bequeaths the same portion of his estate to a cousin or a nephew as he leaves to his son, people are going to look askance at his choice. The man should love his son more than he loves a cousin or nephew. We know that to be the natural thing, and here natural is what's right. We know it is so almost no-matter-what line of reasoning the man might employ in defense of his unusual will. Only in

very unusual circumstances, if ever, could we think it right for a man to favor a nephew more than, or equal to, his own son.

No doubt we could multiply instances in which the "natural and usual" sentiments are regarded as normative standards, but there is a related point which should prove that, for Hume, moral judgments inevitably have a personal aspect. Hume makes a powerful observation in an offhand manner:

...men naturally, without reflexion, approve of that character, which is most like their own. The man of a mild disposition and tender affections, in forming a notion of the most perfect virtue, mixes in it more of benevolence and humanity, than the man of courage and enterprize, who naturally looks upon a certain elevation of mind as the most accomplish'd character (T 604).

Thus what counts as the natural and usual sentiment, and the right stance to take, in a wide variety of cases, will depend upon what sort of person the observer happens to be. A moral judgment is an expression of the person who offers it.¹⁰ This is so in part because what we see (realize, notice, appreciate) is a function of who we are and what we bring to the occasion from our personal history. "To a Cromwell ... discretion may appear an alderman-like virtue.... But in the conduct of ordinary life, no virtue is more requisite" (E 193). Or suppose we consider avarice and prodigality, the two extremes on the spectrum of getting and spending. Hume says, "...each of these extremes is blamed above the other, according to the temper of the person who censures, and according to his greater or less sensibility to pleasure, either social or sensual" (E 194).

We commonly acknowledge the tight connection which exists between the character of a man and the

judgments he makes when we seek, or at any rate find, somebody who will make judgments about ourselves, about the quality of who we are and what we have done. Hume observes our natural predilection toward those who are likely to understand and appreciate us.

The praises of others never give us much pleasure, unless they concur with our own opinion, and extol us for those qualities, in which we chiefly excel. A mere soldier little values the character of eloquence: A gownman of courage: A bishop of humour: Or a merchant of learning (T 322).

Somebody's praise, however glowing, does not mean much to me unless I think that person understands who I am, unless I feel seen and appreciated; and the person who resembles me, or who is better than me in the things I most value, is the one whose praise I will truly treasure.

It is plain that in Hume's view these differences in individual character are not lamentable; it is not a bad thing to be a gownman, say, or a merchant, a soldier or a bishop. Such differences are part of the spice of life. Nobody would wish that we were all alike, despite the fact that our station in society, our roles and preoccupations, will affect and condition our moral judgments. We still have enough in common to permit communication when we need it.

Consider for a moment the possibility of a character which really does match (or approximate) the philosophical moral ideal. This man will occupy the impersonal, general perspective at every opportunity; he will try to conduct himself in a "fully rational" manner. For the sake of discussion, imagine a family man, Mr. Slocum, a man who is, among other things, husband, father, and breadwinner.

Suppose Slocum's wife has been lonely in recent days; she wishes he would stay home instead of going out to bowl three nights a week. She is also concerned about their son, Slocum Junior, who says he feels like an outcast at school because he doesn't have a skateboard. Slocum wants to consider these matters objectively. He must therefore neglect or set aside the fact that these people are his wife and his son. So the question is, should a husband stay home instead of bowling if his wife wishes? Should a father buy his son a skateboard if the child feels a need for it? Enter the fact that the father loves bowling, it is his only exercise, and that he does not respect fads and fashions.

The question remains moot; there can be no answer. It all depends. The general relations of husband to wife, or father to child, certainly generate a variety of obligations, but nothing that will help us with bowling nights and skateboards. Here one must use more personal data. The character of Slocum's relationship with his wife, or with his son, is what's needed. A man who tries to make such personal decisions in an impersonal way would be regarded as an eccentric fool, and we would expect his relationships to suffer from his foolishness.¹¹

Now, this marriage of character and judgment is certainly not what we would expect from the moralist who adopts a "general" point of view and "neglects" all the features of a case which are not universally applicable. Indeed the abstract, general survey seems designed precisely to split individual character and judgment forever asunder. Since the heyday of Kant, many thinkers have taken for granted that 'moral' means 'impersonal' or 'impartial.' And so the question is bound to arise: Are the admittedly

personal judgments Hume discusses really moral judgments?

Here I content myself with the observation that for Hume we are squarely centered in the domain of the moral. He proposes as the ultimate test of merit and virtue two simple criteria (T 606). How is it to live with this person, or to have any close connection with him? Is he "a safe companion, an easy friend, a gentle master, an agreeable husband, or an indulgent father"? And for the rest, how is it for the man himself? Is he agreeable to himself, does he have the "genuine and hearty pride, or self-esteem" which is essential to the character of a man of honor? When I apply these criteria, perhaps to a prospective partner or mate, or to a friend, or even to some historical figure long dead, I do so with a relevant degree of objectivity. But the result is inescapably my judgment, colored in some measure by my preferences and sensitivities.

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1. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, Selby-Bigge edition (Oxford 1960). Further references to the Treatise will be cited as 'T' followed by the relevant page number(s). Also, David Hume, Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, Selby-Bigge edition (Oxford 1963). Further references to Enquiries will be cited as 'E' followed by the relevant page number(s). I will use the pagination of the original 1777 text.
2. Thomas Nagel, The View from Nowhere (Oxford University Press, 1986), Introduction and Chapter VIII.

3. See E 178-187; T 574-591.
4. There are three places to fail. (1) Getting the facts right about the example, the person or situation at hand. (2) Adopting the general viewpoint and considering the facts purely from that perspective. (3) In response to the facts, having a feeling reaction, a pleasure or pain of the kind Hume calls moral approval or disapproval.
5. Compare Stephen D. Hudson, Human Character and Morality (Boston, 1986), p. 85.
6. Kant seems to recognize the strangeness, but he swallows the pill anyway, saying that it is possible "to be doubtful sometimes whether true virtue can really be found anywhere in the world." See Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, Second Section.
7. Some philosophers may want to say that morality is analogous, not to the dictionary, but rather to the language which makes the dictionary possible.
8. Which is not to say that we are sometimes too reasonable, or too rational, or too impartial. if we follow general rules and abstract considerations blindly and doggedly, we create a new way of being unreasonable.
9. David Fate Norton, David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician (Princeton University press, 1982), pp. 134-141.
10. For a discussion of this, see Edmund L. Pincoffs, Quandaries and Virtues (University of Kansas, 1986), p. 4.
11. Cf. Hudson, pp. 85-86.